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Leo Hussain is much sought-after for his interpretations of Mozart, the Second Viennese School and music of the 20th century. Formerly Music Director of Opéra de Rouen and the Salzburg Landestheater, he conducts many of the world’s leading orchestras and at leading opera houses. His 2016 debut at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, with Georges Enescu’s Oedipe led to an immediate re-invitation. He has conducted at Santa Fe (Strauss’s Capriccio), and in productions at La Monnaie (Brussels), Vienna’s Theater an der Wien, the English National Opera, and the Bavarian and Berlin State Operas. His appearances at Romania’s Enescu Festival have seen him conduct Berg’s Wozzeck and Schoenberg’s Gurrelieder. His Glyndebourne performance of The Rape of Lucretia, conducting the London Philharmonic, is on DVD. Orchestral appearances have included performances with the Bamberg Symphony at the Mozart Festival Würzburg (Germany’s oldest Mozart festival), the West German Radio Symphony Orchestra Cologne, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, German Radio Philharmonic of Saarbrücken and Kaiserslautern, Prague Philharmonia and Royal Danish Orchestra. He has conducted the NHK Symphony Orchestra and the Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra at the Tokyo Spring Festival. Leo Hussain studied at Cambridge University and London’s Royal Academy of Music. Early in his career, he was an assistant to Sir Simon Rattle and Valery Gergiev at Salzburg.

Siobhan Stagg is one of Australia’s most outstanding young singers. Highlights of the 2017-18 season include Pamina (Magic flute, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden); Gilda (Rigoletto, Hamburg State Opera); Najade (Ariadne auf Naxos, Bavarian State Opera); and Zerlina (Don Giovanni), Musetta (La Bohème) and Contessa di Folleville (Il viaggio a Reims), Deutsche Oper Berlin. A soloist at the Deutsche Oper Berlin since 2013/14, her roles include Sophie (Der Rosenkavalier), Blonde (Abduction from the Seraglio), Gilda, Marguerite de Valois (Les Huguenots) and Woodbird and Woglinde in The Ring Cycle with Sir Simon Rattle. Elsewhere she has sung Cordelia in Reimann’s Lear (Hamburg State Opera), Blonde (Hamburg State Opera and the Dutch National Opera), the title role in Luigi Rossi’s Orpheus (Royal Opera House), and Morgana (Alcina) and Marzelline (Fidelio) (Grand Théâtre de Genève). Upcoming engagements include her US debut at Lyric Opera of Chicago in the title role of Massenet’s Cendrillon, her debut for the Festival d’Aix-en-Provence and Mélisande in Pelléas et Mélisande, Victorian Opera. Highlights on the concert platform include Brahms’ A German Requiem (Berliner Philharmoniker/Christian Thielemann and Gewandhausorchester Leipzig/Herbert Blomstedt), Zemlinsky’s Lyric Symphony at the BBC Proms/Simone Young, Haydn’s Creation (MSO/Sir Andrew Davis), Mozart arias with Rolando Villazon, Salzburg Mozartwoche (Mozarteumorchester Salzburg/ Kristina Poska) and a tour of Australia with Roberto Alagna.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Othello – Overture, Op 93

In his 50th year Dvořák composed his first program music, three concert overtures, originally conceived as a connected cycle entitled Nature, Life and Love. Dvořák’s letters reveal his intention to paint in music the most powerful expressions of the human soul. He understood nature as the expression of a divine will, a source of life in its aspects of good and evil. Although ‘overture’ here means much the same as ‘symphonic poem’ in the sense used by Liszt and Richard Strauss, it may be that Dvořák, who belonged to the opposing, ‘Brahms’ camp, felt reluctant to use that title or to commit himself too closely to a stated program. (By 1896, however, when composing programmatic orchestral pieces based on ballads by the poet Erben, he did call them ‘symphonic poems’, beginning with The Water Goblin.)

Although the same musical theme denoting nature occurs in all three overtures of 1891, they are independent compositions. Dvořák’s uncertainty what to call each overtone is evident in his sketches. The first was titled In Nature’s Realm or A Summer Night, with the subtitle Solitude. The second was first called Life, but Dvořák settled on the subtitle from the sketches, Carnival. The third was called both Love and Othello. In the final version Dvořák retained the title Othello as being more evocative of his theme: passion and jealousy as personified by the Moor of Shakespeare’s play.

The composer’s manuscript contains a number of quotations from the play, and though the overtone cannot be regarded as a detailed musical resumé of the plot, Dvořák did write to his publisher: ‘it is, to a certain extent, program music.’ A program note possibly authorised by the composer said that he had ‘tried to express some of the emotions engendered in him by the final scenes of Othello as an embodiment of both the gentlest and fiercest expressions of love…the after-reverie of a man whose imagination has been kindled by the theme of the play.’ Dvořák was conscious of having made a new departure in the three overtures of Nature, Life and Love: ‘Here,’ he wrote to a friend, ‘I am poet as well as musician.’ Many good judges of Dvořák’s music have found Othello the finest of the three, and wondered why it is not heard more often.

The opening modal string passage suggests Desdemona’s prayer before retiring. An interjection provides the first hint of the jealousy motif, then the nature theme emerges, sounded by the woodwind and repeated with harsh harmonic colouring. The jealousy theme is characterised by four accented falling semiquavers. These themes form the elements of the Allegro con brio section, and are worked out in a skilful adaptation of sonata form, which could represent to the imagination the scene between Desdemona and the Moor, climaxing in the murder. The music of Desdemona’s prayer returns as Othello prays and repents. After a passage for cymbals, drums, and dark snatches of the nature music, Othello stabs himself and the music reaches its final climax in the forceful statement of the jealousy theme.

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The Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra has performed this work once before, with conductor Stefan Karpe in Hobart on 29 September 2001.

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Debussy was often at pains to explain that his music was not ‘impressionistic’. While he admired the painters whose work had attracted that – initially pejorative – adjective, Debussy was not seeking simply to create visual images in sound. His work, he felt, was much closer to those poets, a generation older than Debussy, who described themselves as Symbolistes. Among these was Paul Verlaine, whose collection Fêtes galantes contains the poem ‘Clair de lune’ that was the inspiration for the third movement of Debussy’s Suite bergamasque for piano. Or so we think. Suite bergamasque seems to have been composed in 1890, but was only published in 1905, and we have little evidence of how Debussy might have revised the work in the interim. Moreover, pre-publicity in 1904 listed the third movement as a Promenade sentimentale in D flat, the same key as Clair de lune. Scholar Roy Howat notes that we don’t know if this represents a ‘change of title or a change of piece’.

‘Promenade sentimentale’ is also the title of a poem by Verlaine. Its setting is the shore of a lake at sunset, where water lilies rock gently (and this may be suggested in the lilting barcarolle rhythm of Debussy’s piece), teals call to each other and the poet is in a state of loneliness and despair. The setting of ‘Clair de lune’, by contrast, is an imaginary garden at night, the song of maskers and revellers mingling with the moonlight, birds sit dreaming, and fountains sob with ecstasy among the marble statues.

Not long after Suite bergamasque was published, Debussy began a long professional association with composer André Caplet. Debussy trusted Caplet absolutely as a masterful orchestrator, and encouraged him to score several piano works for orchestra, some of which are perhaps better known in Caplet’s version.

Gordon Kerry © 2013
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

‘Misera! dove son...Ah! non son io’, K369

Mozart’s concert arias, of which this is an example, were written for specific singers. These bespoke pieces of music were tailored to fit the range, ability, tonal and dramatic qualities of vocalists known to Mozart. This particular aria, ‘Misera! dove son...Ah! non son io’, was composed for Countess Josepha von Paumgarten, a 19-year-old amateur singer. Written in Munich in March 1781, it was composed a matter of weeks after the première season of Idomeneo, the first of Mozart’s operas to demonstrate the full breadth of his skills as a musical dramatist.

Concert arias are stand-alone works. They are small, dramatic set pieces which, almost invariably, borrow their words from full-length opera libretti. ‘Misera! dove son’ is no exception. Mozart has taken the words from Ezio, a libretto by the most esteemed of all dramatic poets of the 18th century, Pietro Metastasio. Based loosely upon events from 5th-century Rome, Ezio presents a classic tale of love, power, jealousy, ambition and intrigue. ‘Misera! dove son’ is sung by Fulvia, who believes that her beloved, Aetius, has been murdered. Her trauma is intensified still further by the fact that her father, Massimo, has had a role to play in her beloved’s death. Thus, a dutiful daughter and a heartbroken lover collide head-on in the anguished emotions of this aria.

Fittingly, given the high emotional stakes, the number begins with accompanied recitative. Here, Fulvia sings of the depths of her grief, comparing it to the misfortunes suffered by figures from Greek mythology (this kind of literary allusion demonstrates Fulvia’s status as a high-born and educated woman). Oddly enough, the recitative begins in rather serene fashion in E-flat major, but becomes somewhat more agitated as it progresses (at one point touching upon the rare key of B-flat minor). Still, the entire recitative section is rather more restrained than the agonised words which might suggest. (This could perhaps be indicative of Countess Paumgarten’s emotional range.) The aria proper begins with the words ‘Ah! non son io’, which are set to a gently flowing downward melody marked Andante sostenuto. As with the recitative, the musical gestures are notably restrained, although they allow for beauty of tone in sustained notes and some brief ornamental flourishes. A change of tempo, Allegro, introduces new material, which is basically cadential but provides further opportunities for sustained notes and embellishments, as well as wide intervals and dramatic leaps. Here we truly get a sense of the character’s agitated mental state.

Although removed from a theatrical context, concert arias were nevertheless performed with dramatic flair. Singers were expected to emote and gesticulate. They were to capture the essence of the scene and deliver it with gusto. It is important to bear in mind that public concerts in Mozart’s day always contained a vocal element. Symphonies did not have the prestige that we might imagine them to have had. This was to come in the following century.

Audiences valued variety. We know, for instance, that ‘Miseral dove son’ was performed at a concert conducted by Mozart in Vienna in 1783. The program comprised a symphony, two piano concertos, a movement from a serenade, improvisations and four arias sung by three different singers. In addition to variety, audiences in Mozart’s day liked getting their money’s worth.

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Symphony No 40 in G minor, K550

Allegro

Adante

Menuetto and Trio (Allegretto)

Finale: Allegro assai

For a composer about whom we know quite a lot, it is surprising how little we know about the circumstances surrounding this particular work, the Symphony No 40 in G minor, especially since it is one of Mozart’s most famous compositions. We know for certain that it was composed in the middle of 1788, which is when Mozart also wrote the symphonies on either side of it: the Symphony No 39 in E-flat and his last symphony, the Symphony No 41 in C, Jupiter. But we know next to nothing about its early performance history. It is inconceivable that Mozart would have composed these three grand symphonies without performances in sight, yet documentary evidence remains sketchy. The fact that the Symphony No 40 exists in two authentic versions – the first without clarinets, the second with – suggests that public performances must have taken place. Trouble is, we don’t know where, when and with whom.

Mozart’s choice of G minor is of note. All but two of Mozart’s 41 symphonies are in major keys. In selecting the minor mode, Mozart is choosing a road far less travelled in music at this time. Minor is the ‘darker’, more mysterious twin of major. It is more volatile than major and contains within its basic structure the unstable and potentially problematic interval of the augmented second. But it also offers a broader harmonic palette than major, bringing with it a range of expressive possibilities. Mozart tended to reserve minor for very particular instances – the solemnity of the Mass in C minor, the lamentations of the Requiem, the thunderous downbeat at the start of Don Giovanni.

The Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra first performed this work with conductor Kenneth Murison Bourn in Hobart on 17 August 1950 and, most recently, with Marko Letonja in Burnie and Zeehan on 6 and 7 November 2014.

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