

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Wed. October 19 The 105th Tokyo Opera City Subscription Concert

Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901)

Opera “Luisa Miller” Overture (Ca. 6min)

Ballet Music from Opera “Macbeth” (ca. 12 min)

Giuseppe Verdi is known as one of the primary figures contributing to the development of Italian opera during the time when Italian nationalism was on the rise. By the time *La Traviata* was staged in 1853, Verdi had already composed sixteen operas since his first (*Oberto*) had opened in 1839.

Luisa Miller was one of the operas that Verdi composed during that time. Collaborating with the librettist Salvatore Cammarano, the opera was developed during the summer of 1849, and based on the play “Kabale und Liebe” (“Intrigue and Love”), which was written by Friedrich Schiller in 1784. The premiere was given in December of 1849 in Naples and is often described as belonging to the composer’s middle period. As the fifteenth opera in his repertoire, Verdi was apparently shifting his focus from the more political statements found in his earlier works to one of relationships and all of the complications that arise. In addition he began to explore orchestral timbres and musical motives in greater detail.

The story presents Luisa and the “*melodrama tragico*” story as she

becomes a victim of her male love-interest, who she knows as Carlo, but who is really Rodolfo, the son of a local count. Rodolfo, in turn loves her, but is tricked into poisoning both her and himself. The theme of the Overture is based on the opening scene from Act III, where Luisa and the chorus sing “**Come in un giorno solo**” while she writes a letter before taking the fatal poison. However, in Act III the theme is in 3/4 time whereas in the Overture, Verdi presents the theme in 4/4 time and with a change in tempo.

The somber opening prepares us for the unfolding tragedy, before picking up in both tempo and dynamics, leading into a featured passage for solo clarinet. As it turned out, the San Carlo Orchestra which performed for the San Carlo Theatre in Naples, (which in turn had commissioned this work), had a clarinet virtuoso by the name of Ferdinando Sebastiani playing as part of its ensemble. Needless to say Verdi was determined to highlight the instrument and the soloist’s abilities throughout the opera, so it can be heard especially in the Overture being presented for this concert series.

Macbeth was Verdi’s tenth opera, composed originally in 1847, and revised significantly in 1865. Based on the Shakespeare play, the composer worked closely with Francesco Maria Piave (and later Andrea Maffei) to create the libretto. Verdi has been quoted as saying that the bard was “one of my very special poets, and I have had him in my hands from earliest youth, and I read and re-read him continually.” So much so that he would go on to compose two more operas based on Shakespeare’s plays: *Falstaff* and *Otello*.

The original version of *Macbeth* did not include the ballet music. This was added when Verdi revised the opera for a Paris performance, where ballet music was considered standard in operas at the time. And since the witches were seen as vital to the action throughout the opera, Verdi decided to create the ballet excerpt for them at the beginning of Act III. The scene included a mixture of dance and mime (with Hecate in a non-dancing role), presented in three sections: First, an *Allegro vivacissimo* dance around the cauldron; a chromatic *Andante* second section featuring Hecate miming the action; and finally a wild *waltz* returns to another dance around the cauldron.

Throughout both of these instrumental excerpts from Verdi’s operas, one can glimpse the wide range of orchestral colourings that the composer explored and expanded through his productive

years in developing Italian opera. The effectiveness of these sonorities to convey the heights and depths of each of the character’s emotions as well as set the stage for his operas and draw the audience into each scene is a testament to the talents of Verdi’s writing. In addition, they have withstood the test of time with audiences, even though the operas themselves have, at times, had limited performances.

Opera “Luisa Miller” Overture

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, cimbasso, timpani, percussion (bass drum), strings

Ballet Music from Opera “Macbeth”

- I. Allegro vivacissimo (ca. 3 min)
- II. Andante (ca. 5 min)
- III. Waltz: Allegro vivacissimo (ca. 3 min)

Instrumentation: flute, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets(2nd doubling on bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum), harp, strings

Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868)

Opera “William Tell” Overture

Rossini had composed nearly three-dozen operas by the time he was about the same age. During the years 1812-1819 he had written twenty-eight of these, though he had begun creating his first works for stage at the mere age of eighteen. In 1823, Rossini moved to Paris where he was under contract by the French government to compose for the Théâtre Italien as well as the Opéra. It would be there, in 1829, that he would write the last of his operatic works, originally written and entitled in French as *Guillaume Tell*.

The libretto was based on the drama by the German poet Schiller regarding the renowned hero William Tell during the 14th century when the Swiss were fighting for their independence from the Austrian Hapsburgs. When Tell refuses to bow to the iconic hat, which was put at the top of a pole by the Austrian governor, Gessler, he is arrested and informed that the only way he can achieve his freedom is by shooting an apple off the top of his own son's head. Also in the mix is Arnold, (the son of the Swiss leader Melchtal), who has rescued and fallen in love with Mathilde, a princess of Austrian descent, which creates romantic tension amidst the political turmoil.

When performed in its entirety, the complete opera requires upwards of six hours to perform. It is said to combine all the theatrical dramatics expected of French opera of the time including ballets and processions, as well as large choral ensembles and Rossini's florid Italian

lyrical melodies. Although the premiere was received well in August of 1829, the sheer length limited further performances of the full production, most presented with significant cuts. The overture alone was Rossini's longest and is often said to foreshadow the tone poems of the coming generation of composers. Included one can hear the fury of a storm, followed by a gentle pastorale which was based on the Swiss *ranz des vaches* (played by herdsmen on an Alpine horn to call their cattle), and finally on to the most famous motive of all, the heroic ride announced by the trumpets.

Rossini would not compose another opera after *William Tell* stating, in hindsight, that “retiring in time requires genius too” when discussing his early retirement with the painter Guglielmo de Sanctis in 1862. Although he would come out of semi-retirement to compose in other genre, including his sacred work *Stabat Mater* (1832/rev. 1841), as well as some works for piano, Rossini would allow this epic to remain as his final stamp on the operatic stage, which in spite of some political controversy around its revolutionary theme, would still avoid most censorship, giving hundreds of performances during his lifetime and continues to be hailed by audiences to this day.

Instrumentation: flute, piccolo, 2 oboes (2nd doubling on English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (triangle, cymbals, bass drum), strings

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 5 in C minor Op. 67

- I. Allegro con brio (ca. 8 min)
- II. Andante con moto (ca. 10 min)
- III. Scherzo, Allegro (ca. 5 min)
- IV. Allegro (ca. 11 min)

Beethoven was renowned beyond his musical capabilities it seems, with a number of eccentric routines, one of which was to carry around a pocket sketchbook, or perhaps even just a folded piece of manuscript paper, to jot down even the briefest ideas that occurred to him throughout his day. For many years, these sketchbooks were considered just part of his eccentricity. However, scholars have come to learn a great deal about how the kernels of ideas of a great many compositions developed.

Considered by many to be one of the most recognizable symphonic works worldwide, first glimpses of material from the first and third movements of the Fifth Symphony can be found in sketchbooks from about 1804. These were developed further in 1806 with ideas for the remaining movements now appearing, and final details worked out while at the same time composing the Sixth Symphony. Beethoven was quite particular about numbering his works in the order of composition, but apparently even he had difficulty discerning which of these two symphonies developed first. At the first performance of both of these works, the numbering was switched in the program, the composer himself labeling what is now called the Fifth the Sixth, and vice versa.

This so-called premiere was actually the result of the many charity performances Beethoven gave, the benefit of which was to be granted performance space and time in Vienna's Theatre-ander-Wien. Beethoven put together an overwhelmingly long repertoire of new works for this particular performance on December 22nd, 1808, with an orchestra that had been under-rehearsed, and performers who had disputes with the composer. Beethoven pushed the limits of the audience not only in the length of the concert, but also having them listen to so many new pieces, all in the environs of a cold theatre, which meant this now best-loved symphony was received with less than warm regard.

It wasn't until more than a year later that the Fifth Symphony met with a much more positive review, in a journal that had been less than supportive of Beethoven in the past, the *Allegemeine musikalische Zeitung*. The review was written by the writer (and composer) E.T.A. Hoffman and helped create a new attitude among critics toward the composer:

“Radiant beams shoot through the deep night of this region, and we become aware of gigantic shadows which, rocking back and forth, close in on us and destroy all within us except the pain of endless longing – a longing in which every pleasure that rose up amid jubilant tones sinks and succumbs. Only through this pain, which, while consuming but not destroying love,

hope, and joy, tries to burst our breasts with a full-voiced general cry from all the passions, do we live on and are captivated beholders of the spirits.”

The depth of motivic development and the range of emotions heard in this symphony forced critics to look much more closely at Beethoven’s work. And although Beethoven had assigned meaning to many of his other works, it is as with the man himself, many myths have been conjured to describe the intentions of the composer when writing the Fifth Symphony, most famous of all is his presumed quote “Thus Fate knocks at the door.” This assignment of a fate theme seemed to return when it was ‘discovered’ that the rhythm of the opening theme corresponded to the Morse code for “V”, and consequently drew attention to the work as the “Victory Symphony” during World War II.

Whatever underlying themes one might associate with the passions conjured up in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, one cannot deny the complete drama the composer created from the opening bars in minor mode of the first movement, to the final closing phrases in a magnificent major mode, triumphantly bringing to a close what has been referred to as: “a demonstration of unification on the very grandest scale to which virtually every composer since has aspired but few have succeeded.” (S. Ledbetter)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings

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