

SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY

May 16, 2009

KATHLEEN BATTLE

MOZART **Symphony No. 38 in D Major, K.504, *Prague***
Adagio; Allegro
Andante
Finale: Presto

ROSSINI **“Una voce poco fa” from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia***

BELLINI **“Oh! Quanto volte” from *I Capuleti e I Montecchi***

INTERMISSION

BIZET **Selections from *L’Arlésienne* Suites 1 and 2**
Suite 1: Prelude
Adagietto
Carillon
Suite 2: Intermezzo
Menuetto
Farandole

orch. HALE SMITH ***This Little Light of Mine***
Let us Break Bread Together
Witness

Symphony No. 38 in D Major, K.504 “Prague”

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg

Died December 5, 1791, Vienna

Mozart was invited to visit Prague in January 1787 for the first performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* outside Vienna, and he discovered that he was famous there. Astonished by this success, he wrote to a friend: “here nothing is talked of but Figaro, nothing played but Figaro, nothing whistled or sung but Figaro, no opera so crowded as Figaro, nothing but Figaro.” It was assumed that a visiting musician would put on an academy of his own music, and on January 19 Mozart led the Prague musicians in a performance of a symphony he had written for the occasion, a symphony that would take the name of the city of its premiere.

Contrary to myth, Mozart did not always compose his music at the last possible minute. He had completed this symphony the previous December 6, and there is clear evidence that he had worked extraordinarily hard on it—surviving sketches and worksheets show the care that went into it. Rather than pouring out of him in an easy rush of creativity, the *Prague* Symphony was the product of careful thought, hard work, and much revision.

It is an extraordinary symphony. It is in only three movements—there is no minuet—but the three-movement form is not a reversion to the Italian *sinfonia*. Instead, this is a thoroughly original and powerful symphony, built on three sharply contrasted movements, all in sonata form. It opens with something rare in a Mozart symphony, a slow introduction. Built on massive chords and uncertain tonality, this *Adagio* establishes a mood of expectant tension, and out of this uncertainty the *Allegro* bursts to sudden life. Mozart’s pulsing, syncopated main theme is unusual: it is not a lyric and self-contained idea, but a fusion of many bits of thematic material, all capable of symphonic growth. There is a melodic and flowing second idea, but Mozart banishes it entirely from the development and concentrates instead on the many possibilities of the opening subject in the development, which one Mozart scholar has called “the greatest, most serious, most aggressive in all Mozart’s works.” Mozart breaks the opening theme down into its motifs and subjects them to complex polyphonic treatment, full of canons, imitative writing, and a false recapitulation. All of this may make the music appear crabbed and intellectual, but exactly the reverse is true—it is brilliant, full of slashing energy and constant motion. Mozart rounds it off with a blazing coda that sends the violins into the highest writing in any of his

symphonies.

After the explosion of the first movement, the Andante can seem an island of calm, but its singing themes and chromatic flow should not obscure the fact that this movement is in sonata form and that Mozart subjects these themes to rigorous development.

Prague was famous for the quality of its wind playing, which may explain why these instruments are given such a prominent role in the finale. Strings announce the sparkling opening—marked *Presto*—and soon the melodic line is leaping brilliantly between winds and strings. Once again, the material is in sonata form, but in contrast to the furious drive of the opening, the finale is full of sunshine, and the *Prague* Symphony sails home in a great blast of energy.

A fascinating sidelight on the *Prague*: much of the music in this symphony bears a close resemblance to music from Mozart's operas, but the strange thing is that some of these operas had yet to be written. The introduction's massive chords and the opening Allegro bear a striking resemblance to the music of the Commendatore and the overture from *Don Giovanni*, composed later in 1787. The violin line from that first theme leaps up to assume the general shape of the fugue subject from the overture to *The Magic Flute*, still four years in the future. The main theme of the Andante is quite similar to the aria "Dalla sua pace," also from *Don Giovanni*, while the opening theme of the finale is drawn from Suzanna and Cherubino's duet "Aprite presto" from *Figaro*. Perhaps the last example was intentional, Mozart's conscious salute to the popularity of that opera with audiences in Prague, but the other similarities—all foreshadowings of operas yet to be written—must remain an extraordinary mystery.

"Una voce poco fa" from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*

GIOACHINO ROSSINI

Born February 29, 1792, Pesaro

Died November 13, 1868, Passy

From the moment of its premiere in 1816, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* has been a favorite of audiences, who delight in the efforts of the lovely Rosina to escape the clutches of Doctor Bartolo and marry Count Almaviva. Along the way come such great characters as the resourceful barber Figaro and the sepulchral singing instructor Don Basilio, as well as a number of hilarious "situations" and set-pieces—this opera is a lot of fun.

One of the most impressive figures in *The Barber* is its tough and imaginative heroine. We get to know Rosina early in Act I in her famous “Una voce poco fa,” where she sings of her wakening love for the youth who serenaded her beneath her window. But as she sings this coloratura aria, full of leaps and runs, we begin to learn more about her: beneath that sweet exterior lurks a shrewd and deadly opponent, and she will get what she wants. Behind her, the orchestra underlines the true meaning of what she is saying in some very subtle ways.

“Oh! Quanto volte” from *I Capuleti e I Montecchi*

VICENZO BELLINI

Born November 3, 1801, Catania, Sicily

Died September 23, 1835, Puteaux

Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has inspired composers as diverse as Berlioz (who wrote a “Dramatic Symphony” based on it), Tchaikovsky (who wrote a “Fantasy-Overture”), Prokofiev (who wrote a ballet), and Bernstein (who wrote the musical *West Side Story* based on it). That play has inspired opera composers as well. The most famous example is Gounod’s *Romeo et Juliette*, but there have been many others, and the young Sicilian composer Vincenzo Bellini came at this story from a different angle in his *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* (“The Capulets and the Montagues”). Bellini based his libretto not on Shakespeare but on earlier Italian opera versions of the play, and his opera is at some points far removed from Shakespeare’s play. Working from music he had written for earlier operas, Bellini composed *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* in the space of only six weeks early in 1830, and it was first performed in Venice in March 1830.

Giulietta sings “Oh! Quanto volte” (“Oh, how much time”) in Act I. She is standing on her balcony and longing for the absent Romeo, and even though she is beautifully dressed, she is miserable in her loneliness. This aria has been described as a *romanza*, a ballad-like setting full of emotional power. From a fairly subdued beginning it grows in expressivity as it proceeds until the final stanza (“Oh! Quanto volte”) demands an extraordinary soprano voice—high, agile, and pure.

Selections from *L’Arlésienne Suites 1 and 2*

GEORGES BIZET

Born October 25, 1838, Paris

Died June 3, 1875, Bougival

Bizet wrote incidental music for a production in Paris of Alphonse Daudet's melodrama *L'Arlésienne* in 1872. Bizet was strongly attracted by the story of young Frederi's fatal passion for a woman who remains unseen throughout the play (the same theme of destructive and hopeless love would later explode in *Carmen*), and for the production he wrote twenty-seven pieces to introduce or accompany the action. The production was an abject failure at its premiere on September 21, 1872. The audience did not know what to make of either the music or Daudet's play and talked throughout the music or walked around, moving chairs and slamming doors. Daudet was stunned by the failure—he wrote to tell Bizet that he felt as if he were 258 years old. But Bizet extracted a suite of four pieces from the incidental music, and at its premiere on November 10 of that year the music was a triumph, one of the few successes Bizet enjoyed in his brief life—he died three years later at the age of 37. Bizet died knowing of only one suite of music from *L'Arlésienne*. The Suite No. 2 was assembled after his death by his friend Ernest Guiraud, who introduced material from other works and re-composed some of the music on his own. This concert offers three movements from each of the two suites.

The opening movement of the Suite No. 1, which is based on the old Provençal Christmas song *Marcho dei Rei* (March of the Kings), is vigorously stamped out by the strings, and Bizet then offers five variations on it, followed by two brief lyric episodes. The first of these is the music associated with Frederi's brother, and in a stroke of daring orchestration Bizet gives this music to the saxophone, which had been invented only about thirty years earlier. Its reedy plaintiveness perfectly suits the gentleness of the supposedly feeble-minded boy. The second episode is the soaring, impassioned violin melody associated with Frederi.

The Adagietto, for four-part muted strings, accompanies one of the most touching scenes in *L'Arlésienne*: the reunion, after a fifty-year separation, of the aged Balthazar and Mère Renaud, who had in their youth been in love but who had not seen each other since.

Bizet assembled the Carillon from two different pieces. The opening comes from the start of Act III, where the wildly tolling churchbells (here portrayed by the horns) announce the beginning of a festival day. The second section is from music associated with the aged Mère Renaud. Bizet returns to the carillon that opened the movement to bring the suite to a brilliant close.

In the *Suite No. 2*, the Intermezzo is in ternary form: its fierce opening gesture gives way

to the haunting central episode for winds over steady string accompaniment. The Minuetto glides along on the delicate sound of solo flute with harp accompaniment, though gradually Bizet fleshes out these textures. The concluding movement is a *farandole*, originally an old Provençal dance in which a procession of dancers parades through the streets, holding hands or handkerchiefs while the musicians lead the column, waving flags or ribbons to signal the dancers. Bizet takes over that old dance (though he sets this one in 2/4 rather than in the traditional 6/8 meter) and transforms it into a thrilling symphonic movement. Over the sound of steadily-beating drums, he introduces the simple dance tune, and gradually this accelerates to a knock-out close.

This Little Light of Mine
Let us Break Bread Together
Witness

orch. HALE SMITH (born 1925)

This program concludes with three well-known and well-loved spirituals from the Afro-American experience. All three of these songs have transcended their original identity as spirituals sung in Afro-American churches and become part of American culture at large: they have been sung and recorded by a number of varied artists, and audiences will know them in many different versions. Ms. Battle has often sung these spirituals with piano accompaniment, but at this concert she sings them in orchestral versions arranged by the composer Hale Smith.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

WHY THIS PROGRAM?

Jahja Ling noted, “Mozart’s *Prague* Symphony is a suitable and appropriate opening for a vocal program because Prague represented Mozart’s operatic home for his greatest successes, *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*. For the second half, during which Kathleen Battle sings arrangements of spirituals, I felt that we could complement that with Bizet’s music from *l’Arlesienne*, all very tuneful and brilliant to close this special concert.”

-Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, Symphony Archivist