

# **Anchorage Symphony Orchestra**

## **Program Notes for Classic Concert “Story Time”**

### **November 13 & 14 in the Atwood Concert Hall**

**Program notes are written by Susan Wingrove, ASO Education Consultant**

#### **Overture to *William Tell***

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)

*William Tell* (1829) was Gioacchino Rossini’s final opera. In a stunning renunciation that is without parallel in music history, Rossini evaded explanations for the rest of his life as to why he abandoned writing operas at age thirty-seven, the peak of his fame and potential. The mysterious reason for Rossini’s vocational choice will never be known. However, current historians speculate that he may have had such serious health problems that he opted to conserve his strength and focus on other kinds of projects rather than continue in a field that made such extreme demands on him physically and mentally.

Musicologist Ernest Newman provides perspective on his role in music history; “Rossini altered the form and spirit of Italian opera in a way that must have been discouraging to the conservative minds of his own day...” Rossini’s sense of humor was almost as legendary as his operas. A typical scenario involves the time he accompanied King George IV at the piano. The King was not an accurate singer, but Rossini kept going in spite of his many vocal errors. Afterwards, the king thanked him for his tactful support. Rossini responded, “Sire, it is my duty to accompany you – even to hell.”

*William Tell* made extraordinary demands on the designers, directors and musicians of the age. The score, six hours in length, is packed with powerful drama, memorable melodies, and glorious orchestrations. The libretto is based on Friedrich Schiller’s play about the legend of William Tell, a fourteenth century hero who led the fight for Swedish independence. Gessler, the tyrant ruler, ravages the countryside with his Austrian troops. Gessler arrogantly orders the villagers to bow down in front of a hat that he placed on top of a tall pole; Tell refuses to perform this humiliating task. As a penalty, Gessler commands him to take an apple and shoot it off his son’s head with an arrow. After Tell competently hits the target without injuring his boy, Gessler furiously sends Tell to prison. He escapes and then kills Gessler with his bow and arrow; the Swiss are freed and William Tell is happily reunited with his family.

The overture, one of the most popular ever written, could also be called a tone poem. Composer Hector Berlioz begrudgingly called it “a work of immense talent which resembles genius so closely as to be mistaken for it.” The overture has four parts. First, eloquent cellos and basses paint a picture of a sunrise in the Swiss mountains. Second, a storm develops and rages. Third, a tranquil atmosphere is created with the *Ranz des Vache*, a herdsman’s song featuring English horn and flute; Swiss herdsman sang this ancient, traditional tune to call the cattle from their pastures to the stables for milking. In the 1768 *Dictionnaire de la Musique*, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote that it was forbidden to sing or play the *Ranz des Vache* near Swiss soldiers as it made them homesick. In part four, trumpets herald the victory of the Swiss army in music that became internationally recognized in the twentieth century as the theme from “The Lone Ranger.”

#### **Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun**

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

In the late nineteenth century, French poet Stephen Mallarme became the leader of the Symbolist movement; the Symbolist mission was to imitate the effects and images of music in literature. Claude Debussy, a frequent participant in weekly artist gatherings at Mallarme’s home, became one of the poet’s closest friends. Debussy fondly recalled climbing four flights of stairs to the apartment and watching his friend lean against a

porcelain stove with a shawl on his small body; “Mallarme, with a soft voice, would lead the conversation which often became a monologue. He fascinated his listeners with the musical cadence of his voice, his luminous eyes, and the subtlety of his gestures.”

In 1892, Debussy composed an evocative musical reflection based on Mallarme’s most famous poem, *The Afternoon of a Faun*. Annotator Melvin Berger succinctly summarized the mysterious verses, which illustrated “in vague, sensuous terms how a faun, a mythological deity, half man, half goat – awakens from a deep sleep in a sunlit forest. The mystical creature recalls a vision of an encounter with two beautiful, godlike nymphs, who eluded his grasp and rebuffed his advances. While struggling to recapture the fugitive images, the faun nibbles on a bunch of grapes. Finally, unable to summon up the pleasurable memories, he surrenders once again to somnolence.”

Debussy stated, “The music of this *Prelude* is a very free illustration of the poem by Mallarme. There are the successive scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the fearful flight of the nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.” Mallarme was thrilled with Debussy’s musical setting, confiding, “I was not expecting anything of this kind! This music prolongs the emotion of my poem and sets its scene more vividly than color.”

The music is all about atmosphere, not a specific story or set of emotions. Critic Wallace Fowlie presents a theory about the famous flute solo that opens the work, writing, “In the high notes of the flute, the entire experience of love may be reduced into a single melodic line, vain and monotonous as all art when contrasted with the immediacy and necessity of experience.” The airy texture of the exquisite orchestration perfectly captures the misty character of the poetry. Each time the melody returns the ever-changing accompaniments add new tone colors and elusive harmonies.

Conductor Gustave Doret recalled preparing for the premiere performance: “Try to understand what a revolution Debussy brought into the technique of instrumentation! Constantly Debussy modified this or that sonority. Everyone kept calm... The hour of the great test has arrived. Debussy hides his anxiety with a grin that I well knew. The orchestra tunes up in the corridor. I ask for silence. ‘My friends,’ I say to the musicians, ‘you know that we are going to defend a great cause this evening. If you have some friendship for Debussy and for me, you will give yourselves completely.’ My good colleagues applauded: ‘Don’t worry, maestro! We’ll win...’ The hall is packed. Suddenly, I feel behind my back – a completely captivated public! The orchestra, delighted, joyfully repeated the work that it had loved and had imposed on the conquered public.”

Critic and annotator Olin Downes, who first heard the *Prelude* in 1900, said it was “as if a rosy mist, or an invisible fragrance had passed and evaporated, leaving nothing clear for memory to grasp.” This muted, dreamy miniature, considered revolutionary at its premiere in 1894, represents the beginning of the modern music movement and has become Debussy’s most popular orchestral work.

### ***Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, Suite for Orchestra*     John Williams (born 1932)**

Beloved American composer, conductor and pianist John Williams has created a remarkable legacy of film music since he began writing for movies in 1958. He has received five Academy Awards (and a record 45 nominations), plus 21 Grammy Awards; Williams was also a 2004 recipient of the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors award for lifetime achievement in the arts. He shared, “It’s still baffling to me. I sit down with a pencil and a piece of paper and do my best... The remarkable thing is that my music is heard by billions of people.” Examples of his incredible scores include *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, *Indiana Jones*, *Schindler’s List*, and the first three *Harry Potter* films.

J. K. Rowling's seven *Harry Potter* novels made publishing history and have become cultural icons as literature and as movies. After the first was published in 1997, more than 400 million copies of the books have been sold, translated into 67 languages. People of all ages treasure the adventures of adolescent orphan Harry and his best friends fun-loving Ron and book-addicted Hermione at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry – and their attempts to conquer the evil Lord Voldemort. Rowling summarized, “My books are largely about death. They open with the death of Harry’s parents. There is Voldemort’s obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price...The books comprise a prolonged argument for tolerance, a prolonged plea for an end to bigotry, to question authority and not assume that the establishment or the press tells you all of the truth.”

Williams, who became a Harry Potter fan, was the perfect choice to create music to bring the first book to the screen. In the published score to the Suite, Williams wrote, “The success of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series has been a heartwarming phenomenon to all those who love books. The worldwide reception that these works have received added greatly to the sense of privilege that I felt when I was given the honor of composing the music for the film version of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. The story’s imaginative array of wizards flying on broomsticks and mail-delivering owls, all occupying wondrous works of magic, offered a unique canvas for music, and the prospect of sharing it with some part of the great army of readers who love these books is a great joy to me.” The brilliant orchestration, memorable melodies and neo-romantic harmonies have resulted in the score being viewed as one of his best.

The Suite consists of four movements from the two hour-plus film – *Hedwig’s Theme*, *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, *Nimbus 2000*, and *Harry’s Wondrous World*. *Hedwig’s Theme* is especially noteworthy – it was the first music written for the movie and was used in the original trailer; it became an important leitmotif/thread in all the films. Williams referred to this theme as a “darkly alluring orchestral waltz.”

Reviewer Jeff Shannon states, “You needn’t see the film of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* to appreciate the wonder, magic, and fearful chills of J.K. Rowling’s phenomenal bestseller in John Williams’s outstanding score. He reportedly derived great pleasure and inspiration from Rowling’s first *Harry Potter* adventure, and created a perfect motif (fully expressed in *Hedwig’s Theme*) to dominate his score. It’s first heard as a dreamy celesta waltz and embellished through myriad incarnations and moods, often with a sinister edge befitting the darker tones of Chris Columbus’s direction. And while Williams occasionally flirts with self-plagiarism (with inevitable variants of his *Hook* and *Star Wars* themes), this is nevertheless a richly regal score that brilliantly evokes the mystery and magic of Harry Potter’s world.”

### ***A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Incidental Music for Voice, Chorus, and Orchestra, Op. 61***

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Felix Mendelssohn was one of music’s legendary child prodigies, an almost frighteningly gifted musician and eager student. He was a poet, painter, superb athlete, learned multiple languages, and played a variety of instruments. He began to compose when he was twelve, and wrote one of chamber music’s masterpieces, the Octet for Strings, when he was just sixteen years old. At the age of 17, he devoured Shakespeare in Tieck and Schlegel’s wildly popular and romantic German translations. He wrote to his sister Fanny, “I have grown accustomed to composing in our garden...Today or tomorrow I am going to dream there the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I have a lot of nerve!” He then composed one of his most imaginative works, the magical Overture to *A*

*Midsummer Night's Dream*. Originally scored for two pianos, he brilliantly orchestrated the piece a year later.

Annotator Brendan Beales aptly points out, “The overture, long recognized as one of the most perfect musical translations of a Shakespeare text, was written when the composer was still in his teens. In common with much of the composer’s early music, it has a freshness and spontaneity that suit admirably the Puckish cavortings and magical landscapes of the play. The four mysterious wind chords that open the piece are associated with the magic spells and potions used by Oberon (via Puck), but give way instantly to the gossamer violin textures of the fairy music.”

Seventeen years later, King Frederick William of Prussia commissioned the now-internationally-famous composer to write incidental music for a new production of Shakespeare’s immortal masterpiece. The director was Ludwig Tieck, one of Germany’s highly respected poets, renowned for his translations of Shakespeare’s texts. The result was a dozen evocative instrumental and vocal numbers that miraculously capture the essence and content of the play. The wildly successful production incorporating the overture and new music premiered at the opening of a new theatre in Potsdam in 1843.

Mendelssohn creatively borrowed motives from the overture – for example, the four opening chords are recalled and explored for the dramatic entrance of Oberon and Titania in the last Act – to develop the new pieces. The score also includes the splendid *Wedding March*, which today is still a popular choice at countless marriage ceremonies all over the world. Composer and critic Robert Schumann admiringly wrote that the incidental music glows with “the bloom of youth.”

Shakespeare always used a significant amount of live music in productions of his plays. Famed orchestral annotator Edward Downes points out, “Mendelssohn and Tieck in their collaboration went much further. Not only did they supply music for Shakespeare’s songs, Mendelssohn composed substantial entr’actes and long stretches of background music to Shakespeare’s dialogue as well as dances, marches, fanfares, sometimes just a single note to lend atmosphere to a word or an action on the stage.”

The ASO’s presentation tonight will include readings from the text, short solos, women’s chorus, and the evocative orchestral music. As Puck reminds us at the conclusion of the play –

“If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended,  
That you have but slumbered here,  
While these visions did appear...”