

Peoria Symphony Orchestra

January 24, 2016

Program Notes

by Michael Allsen

This family matinee, titled “Fairy Tales and Scary Tails” features five works: three of which have appeared in the Disney animated films *Fantasia* and *Fantasia 2000*. The first two works are on the “scary” side: Mussorgsky’s threatening *Night on Bald Mountain* and the skeletal *Danse macabre* by Saint-Saëns. Next is gorgeous music from Tchaikovsky’s fairy-tale ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*. Two French pieces round off the show, the *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* by Dukas, and the sometimes satirical and hilarious *Carnival of the Animals*, featuring narrator Dr. Kim Pereria.

Modest Mussorgsky (1839 -1881)

Night on Bald Mountain (edited by Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov)

Mussorgsky composed the “orchestral fantasy” Night on Bald Mountain in 1867. The version heard at this concert was revised and orchestrated by Rimsky-Korsakov, who also conducted the premiere in St. Petersburg on October 27, 1886.

The young Mussorgsky first came across Nicolay Gogol’s short story *St. John’s Eve* as a teenager. This rather bloody and disturbing tale involves jealousy, deals with the Devil, and human sacrifice. Several years later, he returned to Gogol’s story as the basis for an orchestral piece - in particular its witches’ sabbath scene, and the satanic Tchernobog on Mount Trigalaff. Though his mentor Mily Balikirev had helped him with the original conception, the finished work was just too wild and barbaric for Balikirev, and he criticized it harshly. Mussorgsky reworked the piece twice, including a version intended to be used in a collaborative version of the opera *Mlada* in 1872. However, the most familiar form of this piece is a version orchestrated and thoroughly reorganized by Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov after Mussorgsky’s death.

Though the music of Rimsky-Korsakov’s version is based upon one of the later, “tamer” versions of *Bald Mountain*, his program reinstated Mussorgsky’s original concept. He included the following note with the published score: “Subterranean sounds of supernatural voices... Appearance of the spirits of darkness, followed by that of Satan himself... Glorification of Satan and celebration of the Black Mass... The Sabbath Revels... At the height of the revelry, the bell of a village church, sounding in the distance, disperses the spirits of darkness... Daybreak.” The music is appropriately satanic, building in short order from string tremolos to a ponderous bass line to a savage main theme shouted by the low brass. Nervous woodwind lines are constantly pushed aside by violent and triumphant brass music. Near the end, the witches’ sabbath is brought to a screeching halt by the tolling of bells. A long coda begins with quiet “dawn music” from the strings, and concludes with a peaceful epilogue played the solo clarinet and flute.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)
Danse macabre, Op.40

Saint-Saëns composed this brief symphonic poem in 1874, and directed its premiere in Paris on January 24, 1875.

Saint-Saëns composed four symphonic poems - single-movement programmatic pieces that tell a story or paint a musical image - and his *Danse macabre* (“Dance of Death”) is by far his most often played today. But this was not always the case: with its startling orchestral effects and strange harmonies, it was just a bit much for the audience at its premiere in January 1875. The inspiration for this piece was a poem by Saint-Saëns’s friend Henri Cazalis, based on the story of Death as a fiddler. According to legend, on Halloween Death leads a grotesque dance of the skeletons of the dead. The poem’s title *Égalité, Fraternité...* (“Equality, Brotherhood...”) appropriates the old French revolutionary slogan to comment ironically on the thoroughly “democratic” nature of death - as the dead of all ranks of society parade around, and get downright frisky together in their bones. Saint-Saëns originally set the Cazalis poem as a song, but then reworked this music as a symphonic poem, giving some of the vocalist’s music to a prominent part for solo violin, who plays the role of Death.

The work begins with the tolling of midnight, and the solo violin enters abruptly with a discordant harmony - a diminished fifth, or tritone, popularly known as the devil’s interval. The flute introduces a ghostly main theme, while the violin plays a sinuous answer. Both themes are developed and in a nod to the granddaddy of all “spooky” pieces, the “Witches Sabbath” from Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*, there is a short fugue. Throughout, Saint-Saëns uses the xylophone - making one of its first appearances in an orchestral score - to represent the rattling of the dancers’ bones as they frolic to Death’s tune. Just as the dance reaches its wildest, it is cut short by the dawn - the oboe standing in for the rooster call. The piece ends with a wistful little coda by the solo violin.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Suite from *The Sleeping Beauty*, Op.66a

Tchaikovsky completed his ballet score The Sleeping Beauty in 1889-1889, and the ballet was premiered in St. Petersburg on January 15, 1890. The orchestral suite heard here was published in 1899, after the composer’s death, edited by Tchaikovsky’s former student Aleksandr Ziloti.

Tchaikovsky’s three great ballets remain staples of the repertoire of both ballet companies and symphony orchestras: *Swan Lake* (1876), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1889), and *The Nutcracker* (1892). *Swan Lake* was his first attempt at writing a ballet score, and though his score was masterful, the production was a failure. Eleven years later, Tchaikovsky was ready to try again - by then he was among Russia’s most successful composers. The director of the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg, Ivan Vsevolozhsky, approached him with a commission for a ballet based upon the familiar *Sleeping Beauty* fairy tale. Fairy tales were of course the basis of many ballets in the Romantic era, and were part of the popular adult literature of the day. Though we most often

know them most often in milder “Disneyfied” versions today, fairytales were not in any way “kid stuff” in the 19th century, and often featured child abduction, murder, dismemberment, and sexual undercurrents that were distinctly PG-13. The *Sleeping Beauty* story was first printed in French in 1697 by Charles Perrault, an author who edited several fanciful tales - partly derived from French folk tales - that are well-known today. *Sleeping Beauty* was then adapted and published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812.

The choreographer for the new ballet was the formidable Marius Petipa, who oversaw the “Golden Age” of St. Petersburg’s Imperial Ballet. *The Sleeping Beauty* is considered his masterpiece. (Though he also had a hand in *The Nutcracker* two years later and in the successful revival of *Swan Lake* after Tchaikovsky’s death.) Petipa and Tchaikovsky worked well together, though it was primarily Petipa who ran the collaboration: he provided the composer with a minutely-detailed set of instructions for each dance. Considering the size of the score - over four hours in its original, uncut version - Tchaikovsky worked with amazing speed, completing the score over the winter and spring of 1888-89. *The Sleeping Beauty*’s premiere, on January 15, 1890, was much more successful than *Swan Lake* had been - for his part the composer felt it to be among his finest works.

Given the success of the ballet, Tchaikovsky saw the desirability of publishing an orchestral suite - but dithered over which movements to include, eventually delegating the issue to his student and sometime assistant Aleksandr Siloti. Siloti’s version, containing five movements only lightly edited from the original ballet score, was published in 1899, seven years after Tchaikovsky’s death. It opens with a sweeping *Introduction*, which begins with fiery music for Carabosse, the evil fairy who lays a curse on the baby Princess Aurora: that she will be pricked by a needle on her sixteenth birthday and die. Most of the movement is taken up by the sweeter music of the Lilac Fairy, one of baby Aurora’s fairy godmothers, who mitigates the curse so that the princess will not die, but sleep for a hundred years. The dramatic *Adagio (Pas d’action)* comes from Aurora’s sixteenth birthday party in Act I, as four princes appear to present roses to her as love tokens. The more humorous *Pas de caractère* comes from Act III, the wedding of Aurora and her prince charming, Florimund, where there is a set of dances by a whole series of characters from *other* fairy tales. In this case, it is Puss in Boots and the White Cat, portrayed by sly, distinctly feline music. The *Panorama* sets up the climax of Act II: this music plays as the Lilac Fairy guides Prince Florimund through an enchanted forest to where Princess Aurora is sleeping. The *Waltz* that ends the suite returns us to their wedding in Act III, with a grand swirling waltz for the entire party.

Paul Dukas (1865-1937)
The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Dukas composed his The Sorcerer's Apprentice (L'apprenti sorcier) in 1897, and it was first performed in Paris on May 18, 1897.

Paul Dukas had a fine reputation in French music as a composer, prolific critic and writer on musical topics, music editor, and as an influential teacher of orchestration at the Paris Conservatory. As a composer, Dukas remained a conservative, strongly allied to the Romantic tradition - though younger, more radical composers like Debussy and Stravinsky knew and were influenced by his work. Dukas was a careful and self-critical musical craftsman, and published fewer than a dozen pieces in his lifetime, destroying nearly as many works that did not meet his exacting standards - often to the dismay of his friends and music publisher!

One work that did survive his ruthless self-editing was *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, subtitled "symphonic scherzo after a ballad of Goethe." It is certainly Dukas' most lighthearted piece, and his student Olivier Messiaen later insisted that it was intended as a satire of the hyper-serious symphonic poems of Strauss and others. It was already a popular piece when Walt Disney famously adapted it as the central episode of the 1940 animated feature *Fantasia*. The familiar images of Mickey Mouse and single-minded brooms were actually drawn directly from the Goethe ballad that inspired Dukas. Goethe's 1797 poem *Die Zauberlehrling* - itself based upon a Classical Greek story by Lucian - tells of a lazy student magician, who is left alone by his master with orders to fill a cistern with water. Tired of hauling buckets, he uses a spell to animate a broom to do his work. The broom does the task quickly, but the apprentice forgets the spell that will stop the broom, and the house is soon awash. In desperation, he whacks the broom with an axe, but to his dismay finds that that he now has not one, but two highly motivated brooms. More strikes with the axe only increases the number of brooms in exponential progression. Just when the entire house is flooded, the sorcerer returns and cancels the spell, returning everything to normal.

Dukas' version of this story is brilliantly orchestrated and colorful, beginning with a mysterious passage that hints at the main theme. There is a sudden whirlwind of activity that represents the magic spell, and the broom, personified at first by the bassoon, comes slowly to life, playing a theme that will dominate the rest of the piece. The music becomes more and more frantic - you can feel the apprentice's desperation as things get completely out of hand. He first tries a magic spell and then the blows of the axe are clearly heard in the music. All is quiet for a moment, but Dukas then paints the multiplying brooms coming to life with a lugubrious contrabassoon solo and a grotesque fugue. There is increasing chaotic and stormy music, until the entrance of the sorcerer, in the guise of the brass section. After a few forlorn yelps from the bassoons, representing the dying brooms, there is a quiet little epilogue, and a sudden, tongue-in-cheek ending.

Camille Saint-Saëns Carnival of the Animals

Saint-Saëns composed this suite in February 1886, and it was first performed in a private concert at the home of his friend Charles Lebouc in Paris on March 9, 1886. With the exception of The Swan, this music remained unpublished until 1922. Its first public performance was in April 1922 at the Concerts Colonne in Paris.

Though he was certainly capable of wit and humor, Saint-Saëns had a reputation as a rather stern and solemn figure, and his music is almost all thoroughly serious. His *Carnival of the Animals* is a happy exception to the rule: one of his few truly lighthearted and funny pieces. He dashed the work off in a few weeks in February 1886, partly as a bit of fun after a thoroughly frustrating concert tour of Germany, though he had apparently conceived of the idea of a suite on animal themes at least twenty years before. There were several private performances of *Carnival of the Animals* during the composer's lifetime, but Saint-Saëns adamantly refused to publish it - though his will stipulated that it could be published after his death. He did publish a single excerpt, *The Swan*, as a separate piece for cello and piano in 1887, and this movement became phenomenally popular in 1905 when choreographer Mikhael Folkine used it as music for a ballet for the ballerina Anna Pavlova. (*The Dying Swan* became Pavlova's signature ballet and she performed it over 4000 times in her career.) Saint-Saëns seems to have had the sense that when it was published *Carnival of the Animals* would be popular, and might damage his reputation as a thoroughly "serious" composer. Though it did not harm his reputation when it appeared in 1922, the suite quickly became the most popular instrumental work by Saint-Saëns. In 1949, the American poet Ogden Nash wrote a set of verses for the work, and these are now almost always included in performances of *Carnival of the Animals*, read as droll introductions to each movement. *Carnival of the Animals* - like Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* or Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* - is often heard on children's programs, but it is also a thoroughly sophisticated piece, with a whole series of witty allusions to music by other composers and by Saint-Saëns himself.

The suite is scored for a small ensemble, with two pianos, piccolo and flute, clarinet, percussion, xylophone, and string quintet - with the quintet often expanded, as at this concert, to a full string section. Saint-Saëns also calls for the rare glass harmonica in *The Aquarium*, but this part is more usually played by celesta. It begins with an *Introduction and Royal March of the Lion* - the oriental-sounding march a quotation from his song cycle *Persian Melodies*, and the roars provided by one of the pianos and the lower strings. *Hens and Cockerels* is pure poultry, with clucking and crowing, and a sly reference to a Baroque harpsichord piece by Rameau, *The Hen*. *Horses of the Tartary* (Saint-Saëns subtitles this one "*Swift Animals*") is a furiously fast duet for the two pianos. For *Tortoises*, Saint-Saëns makes another hilarious musical reference, now to Offenbach's famous "Can-Can" from *Orpheus in the Underworld*. This skirt-raising dance is usually played at blazing speed, but here it appears at a glacial pace with a solemn piano accompaniment. *The Elephant* is a ponderous waltz for the basses, quoting a pair of well-known melodies by Mendelssohn and Berlioz. The brief *Kangaroos* has the two pianists hopping around one another in alternating solos. For *Aquarium*, the pianos play rippling aquatic music above muted strings, while flute and celesta swim placidly by. The violins trade "hee-haws" in *Persons with Long Ears* - which Saint-Saëns intended as a parody of both donkeys and French music

critics! There is a long tradition of pieces using the cuckoo's distinctive two-note call, and in *The Cuckoo in the Deep Woods*, the clarinet plays the role of the bird, singing nonchalantly above a dense, almost oppressive piano background. *Aviary* is a twittering feature for the flute and pianos. Saint-Saëns sarcastically included *Pianists* in his menagerie as well: playing the scale exercises that anyone who has ever taken a piano lesson will know and loathe. (The score instructs the pianists to play awkwardly, like beginners.) For *Fossils*, Saint-Saëns draws heavily on his own *Danse Macabre* with the xylophone again representing rattling bones. This movement features a host of musical quotations, including the songs "Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman" ("Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"), Rossini's aria "Una voce poco fa" from *The Barber of Seville*, and several others. *The Swan* is a gorgeous romantic cello solo, written for the composer's friend Charles Lebouc. The *Finale* brings everything to high-spirited conclusion, with some particularly flashy bits for the two pianos...and few concluding "hee-haws" for good measure!

program notes ©2016 by J. Michael Allsen **CARNIVAL OF THE ANIMALS**

Poems by Ogden Nash

INTRODUCTION

Camille Saint-Saëns

Was wracked with pains,
When people addressed him,
As Saint-Saens.
He held the human race to blame,
Because it could not pronounce his name,
So, he turned with metronome and fife,
To glorify other kinds of life,
Be quiet please - for here begins
His salute to feathers, fur and fins.

THE LION

The lion is the king of beasts,
And husband of the lioness.
Gazelles and things on which he feasts
Address him as your highness.
There are those that admire that roar of his,
In the African jungles and velds,
But, I think that wherever the lion is,
I'd rather be somewhere else.

COCKS AND HENS

The rooster is a roistering hoodlum,
His battle cry is cock-a-doodleum.
Hands in pockets, cap over eye,
He whistles at pullets, passing by.

THE WILD DONKEY

Have ever you harked to the donkey wild,

Which scientists call the onager?
It sounds like the laugh of an idiot child,
Or a hepcat on a harmoniger,
But do not sneer at the donkey wild,
There is a method in his heehaw,
For with maidenly blush and accent mild
The donkey answers shee-haw.

THE TORTOISE

Come crown my brow with leaves of myrtle,
I know the tortoise is a turtle,
Come carve my name in stone immortal,
I know the turtoise is a tortle.
I know to my profound despair,
I bet on one to beat a hare,
I also know I'm now a pauper,
Because of its tortley, turtley, torper.

THE ELEPHANT

Elephants are useful friends,
Equipped with handles at both ends,
They have a wrinkled moth proof hide,
Their teeth are upside down, outside,
If you think the elephant preposterous,
You've probably never seen a rhinosterous.

KANGAROOS

The kangaroo can jump incredible,
He has to jump because he is edible,
I could not eat a kangaroo,
But many fine Australians do,
Those with cookbooks as well as boomerangs,
Prefer him in tasty kangaroomeringues.

THE AQUARIUM

Some fish are minnows,
Some are whales,
People like dimples,
Fish like scales,
Some fish are slim,
And some are round,
They don't get cold,
They don't get drowned,
But every fishwife
Fears for her fish,
What we call mermaids
They call merfish.

MULES

In the world of mules
there are no rules.
(Laughing, In the world of mules
There are no rules)

THE CUCKOO IN THE WILD

Cuckoos lead bohemian lives,
They fail as husbands and as wives,
Therefore, they cynically disparage
Everybody else's marriage

BIRDS

Puccini was Latin, and Wagner Teutonic,
And birds are incurably philharmonic,
Suburban yards and rural vistas
Are filled with avian Andrew Sisters.
The skylark sings a roundelay,
The crow sings "The Road to Mandalay,"
The nightingale sings a lullaby,
And the sea gull sings a gullaby.
That's what shepherds listened to in Arcadia
Before somebody invented the radia.

PIANISTS

Some claim that pianists are human,
Heh, and quote the case of Mr. Truman.
Saint Saëns on the other hand,
Considered them a scurvy band,
A blight they are he said, and simian,

Instead of normal men and wimian.

FOSSILS

At midnight in the museum hall,
The fossils gathered for a ball,
There were no drums or saxophones,
But just the clatter of their bones,
Rolling, rattling carefree circus,
Of mammoth polkas and mazurkas,
Pterodactyls and brontosauruses
Sang ghostly prehistoric choruses,
Amid the mastodonic wassail
I caught the eye of one small fossil,
“Cheer up sad world,” he said and winked,
“It’s kind of fun to be extinct.”

THE SWAN

The swan can swim while sitting down,
For pure conceit he takes the crown,
He looks in the mirror over and oves,
And claims to have never heard of Pavlova.

THE GRAND FINALE

Now we’ve reached the grand finale,
On an animalie, carnivalie,
Noises new to sea and land,
Issue from the skillful band,
All the strings contort their features,
Imitating crawly creatures,
All the brasses look like mumps
From blowing umpah, umpah, umps,
In outdoing Barnum and Bailey, and Ringling,
Saint Saens has done a miraculous thingling.