

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
January 20, 2019
Michael Allsen

This program includes pieces that will be fun for children and grown-up children alike. Narrators Greg Batton, Yvonne Greer, and Lee Wenger, pianist Geoffrey Duce, and violinist Sirena Huang join us in presenting musical version of four wonderful children's books.

Jean de Brunhoff's beloved French children's book *Histoire de Babar (The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant)* was published in 1931, and it was an immediate hit, quickly appearing in translations across Europe and in the United States. In the story, Babar is living happily in the jungle when his mother is shot by a hunter. He makes his way to a big city—never named but certainly Paris—where he is taken in by the Old Lady, who clothes him properly, sees to his education, and even buys him a car! Babar's young cousins Arthur and Celeste find him in the city, and bring him back to the land of the elephants. Shortly afterward, the King of the Elephants dies (from eating a bad mushroom) and Babar is elected King. The story ends with the wedding of Babar and Celeste.

Francis Poulenc's version of *Babar* was written in the summer of 1940, while he was staying with relatives in the country near Bordeaux. As he later recalled, his four-year-old cousin Sophie objected to the "ugly" music he was playing on the piano, and put her copy of *Histoire de Babar* on the piano, insisting that he "play" the story instead! He began to read the story, improvising little musical selections as he went. He was quickly surrounded by a crowd of his little cousins and kids from the neighborhood—when he finally published the music, he dedicated it to all eleven children. Poulenc gathered his improvisations into a 13-movement piano suite, and performed it together with narrator Pierre Bernac on a radio broadcast in June 1946. In 1962, composer Jean Françaix created an orchestral version. (Today's performance blends both the original solo piano suite with movements from the orchestration by Françaix.) The music is modern, but always charming—each movement is a little characteristic piece representing the story: a lullaby for the scene with his mother, a wild gallop as drives his car, and so forth. Typically for Poulenc the music is filled with good humor, and moments of ridiculousness and comedy.

The 20-year-old Malaysian phenomenon Tengku Irfan has already established himself on the world stage as a piano soloist, as a composer and as a conductor. He appeared with the Peoria Symphony Orchestra in 2016, performing the emotionally challenging piano part to Bernstein's *Age of Anxiety* symphony. He has been commissioned by the

PSO for a new work presented on this program: a musical score to the children's book *The Adventures of Mr. Fuzzy Ears* by Peoria author Donna Carr-Roberts. Mr. Fuzzy Ears is a small dog who in fact finds many friends at the local Humane Society.

Before his untimely death last year, Glen Roven was a successful composer, arranger, conductor, and stage musical director. According to Roven, he first thought about setting Margaret Wise Brown's classic children's bedtime book *The Runaway Bunny* in 2001, when he heard the story read to actress Emma Thompson in the film *Wit*. It was first sketched out as a concerto for violin, singer and orchestra, but Roven later changed the piece to include a straightforward narration of this sweet story: a little bunny imagining himself running away in all sorts of ways before he eventually returning to his mother's love. ("Have a carrot," said the mother bunny.)

Sergey Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* is one of the most often-played pieces at concerts for families and kids, because it was designed for just that purpose. In 1936, the composer took just four days(!) to write a work commissioned by the Central Children's Theater in Moscow. Their idea was to "cultivate musical tastes in children from the first years of school," and Prokofiev filled this commission with a wonderful blend of a fun storyline provided by a narrator and exposure to various instruments of the orchestra in the guise of characters. Peter himself is a jaunty string theme, and we also get to meet a bird (flute), a rather serious duck (oboe), a clarinet cat, Peter's gruff grandfather (bassoon), and a sneering wolf (horns).

The story begins as Peter, a rather naughty boy, wanders out into the meadow without his grandfather's permission. He has conversations with his friend the bird and a duck, and saves the bird from a prowling cat. His grandfather comes out to scold Peter and bring him home, knowing that there was a wolf prowling around. The wolf appears, and after a furious chase, gobbles up the duck in one bite. Watching this from behind garden wall, Peter enlists his friend the bird to pester the wolf and distract him. Peter lassos the wolf's tail and hauls him up into a tree. A group of hunters appear, shooting their guns as they look for the wolf, and are surprised to see that Peter has already caught him. The story ends with a triumphal march, as Peter and the hunters haul the wolf off to the zoo. The poor duck makes one last appearance, quacking away sadly in the wolf's belly.