

Inspired Responses

by René Spencer Saller

The three composers on this program are at once deeply original and deeply indebted to other composers. That's not a contradiction: it's how music works. Genius doesn't spontaneously self-generate. The slippery quality we call originality comes from inspired assimilation. To compose is to listen closely to other voices and join an ongoing conversation.

The German conductor-composer Peter Ruzicka used the last known melody composed by Richard Wagner as a springboard for *Elegie: Remembrance for Orchestra*, which receives its U.S. premiere with these performances. Like much of the composer's catalog, *Elegie* is highly allusive, or, if you don't mind a bit of academic jargon, intertextual. It finds its own voice by responding to an "unanswerable" prompt from the distant past. Here Ruzicka communes with the spectral Wagner, sorcerer of Bayreuth and eternal Romantic provocateur.

No one understood these posthumous dialogues better than Felix Mendelssohn, who studied the works of J.S. Bach and spent the greater part of his short life tirelessly promoting the long-dead composer's genius. While barely out of his teens, the Hamburg-born prodigy almost single-handedly launched a Bach revival that continues to the present day. But his Violin Concerto in E minor involved the active participation of another musician, one who was very much alive: Ferdinand David, his longtime friend and colleague. Their close collaboration, which took place on and off over six years, produced a violin concerto that instantly transformed the genre, setting new standards for Romantic virtuosity.

John Adams explains in his program notes for *Harmonielehre* that he conceived the 1985 orchestral piece as a response—parodic, not ironic—to the influence of Arnold Schoenberg and 12-tone composition. But Schoenberg wasn't Adams's only source of inspiration. Adams was intrigued by Jungian theory at the time, and images from his dreams shape *Harmonielehre*'s harmonic landscape. A live recording of a Powell Hall performance of *Harmonielehre* by the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, led by David Robertson, was released in 2007 and remains available as an mp3 download.

Remembrance and Response

Born in Düsseldorf on July 3, 1948, Peter Ruzicka studied music theory, piano, and oboe in Hamburg from 1963 to 1968. He spent the next eight years focusing on musicology and law in Munich, Hamburg, and Berlin before earning his doctorate in 1977. The recipient of many prestigious awards and honors, Ruzicka has conducted both his own works and those of other composers in concert halls worldwide. Since 1990 he has served on the faculty of the Hochschule für Musik und Theater.

Although Ruzicka completed *Elegie: Remembrance for Orchestra* in 2014, its world premiere did not take place until April 16, 2016, when it was performed by the Staatskapelle Dresden. The St. Louis Symphony Orchestra has the privilege of performing the U.S. premiere with these concerts.

Elegie is dedicated to Christian Thielemann, chief conductor at the Staatskapelle Dresden. Since 2015, the same year he won the coveted Richard Wagner Award in Leipzig, Thielemann has served as the musical director of the Bayreuth Festival, sacred ground for Wagner devotees. Needless to say, Wagner looms large in Ruzicka's *Elegie*.

In his own program notes, Ruzicka mentions Wagner's three-act music drama *Tristan und Isolde* (completed in 1859 but not staged until six years later). Arguably the most influential opera of the 19th century, *Tristan* swept away a century's worth of convention in roughly four feverish hours. With its intense chromaticism, its deliciously ambiguous harmonic insignia (the so-called *Tristan* chord), and its prolonged strip-tease of a resolution, Wagner's voluptuous music drama continues to provoke and polarize more than 150 years later.

The Composer Speaks

"The last 13 bars that Richard Wagner wrote and played for his friends at the Palazzo Vendramin on the evening before his death are a declaration of love for [his wife] Cosima—in the form of a mysterious question. The *Elegie (Elegy)* appears like a musical self-observation referring, as from afar, to *Tristan* and the circumstances surrounding its composition. Wagner's piano sketch has occupied me for a long time. Its openness and indefiniteness caused me to pursue the thought, and to undergo a highly personal musical rapprochement and distancing. For

this, I selected the sonic potential of a string orchestra, underlain by the impulses and 'shadowy sounds' of three flutes and percussion. Wagner's question ultimately remains. And it still seems unanswerable, even today...." —Peter Ruzicka

E-Minor Masterpiece

Felix Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor is often treated as if it were his only violin concerto, despite the rediscovery in 1950 of another, in D minor, which he appears to have composed between the ages of 12 and 14. Although Yehudi Menuhin and others have recorded compelling interpretations of the earlier concerto, it's Mendelssohn's last major orchestral work, the Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64, that everyone remembers.

Op. 64 had a long gestation. It almost certainly wouldn't exist, at least not in its current form, without the diligent participation of its dedicatee, the soloist at the premiere and Mendelssohn's friend since adolescence: Ferdinand David. Shortly after accepting the position of music director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835, Mendelssohn appointed David concertmaster. A few years later, when the composer began thinking about writing a new violin concerto, he turned to his old friend for advice.

On July 30, 1838, Mendelssohn wrote to David: "I should like to write a violin concerto for you next winter. One in E minor runs through my head, the beginning of which gives me no peace." Together the two men hashed out the present work, mostly by correspondence, over the next six years. Mendelssohn was 29 years old when he began the concerto and 35 when he signed the autographed score, dated September 16, 1844. His correspondence shows that he kept soliciting David's input until the premiere, which took place on March 13, 1845. David was the soloist for the first performance, but Mendelssohn was too ill to lead the orchestra. He conducted the concerto for the first time later that year, with David resuming soloist duties.

Rigor and Romanticism

Since its premiere Op. 64 has been a rite of passage for violin virtuosos. In the right hands, its Bachian rigor and Romantic lyricism make for a gripping interpretation. Mendelssohn's melodies are so seductive, his

orchestrations so sumptuous, that it's easy to forget how unconventional the concerto must have sounded when it was new. Instead of the standard orchestral introduction, Mendelssohn starts the solo violin singing right away—the same obsessive little ditty that he mentioned in his letter to David. This enigmatic theme blossoms into an ardent rhapsody, a reminder that the opening movement's tempo marking is *Allegro molto appassionata*.

Another striking innovation: Mendelssohn's seamless transitions from the first to the second movement, and then from the second to the third movement. As a composer, conductor, and performer, he disliked being distracted by applause during and between movements (which was then customary), so he devised ingenious ways to preempt any crowd noise. For instance, the cadenza in the first movement comes not at the end, as the audience would have expected, but at a little past the midpoint. Unusually for the time, Mendelssohn wrote out the cadenza instead of leaving it for the soloist to improvise. Perhaps even more unconventionally, after its big star turn the solo violin reverts to accompaniment, flinging ricochet arpeggios against the orchestral recapitulation. Later on, the winds and solo violin collude in a preview of the upcoming *Andante*.

Then, while the rest of the orchestra falls silent, the bassoon sustains its note from the last chord of the *Allegro*, sliding into the central *Andante* and then modulating up a half step to C major. The slow movement is lustrous and lyrical, with a somewhat darker contrasting middle section in A minor. In one daunting passage, the soloist must play both lead and accompaniment before the sunny C major theme returns to guide the movement to a blissful end.

Between the second movement and the closing *Allegretto*, the solo violin and strings offer a brief linking intermezzo in E minor. This wistful moment gives way to the ebullient finale, which begins with a trumpet fanfare and closes with an unbridled coda. Mendelssohn ends the concerto in magical E major, the same key he chose for his overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, composed when he was only 17 years old.

Schoenberg and the Subconscious

Completed in 1985, *Harmonielehre* marked the end of an 18-month bout of writer's block for John Adams. The title of the expansive orchestral work is the German word for the theory of harmony. Although several books have been published under that title, Adams meant to name-check Arnold Schoenberg's revolutionary music-theory classic. As a student at Harvard, Adams studied with Schoenberg's student Leon Kirchner, who maintained a nuanced but respectful admiration for his former master. Although Adams could appreciate Schoenberg's ideas, he resented the relentless ugliness of his aesthetic, the weight of his authority.

Schoenberg represented "something twisted and contorted," Adams explained. "He was the first composer to assume the role of high priest, a creative mind whose entire life ran unflinchingly against the grain of society, almost as if he had chosen the role of irritant. Despite my respect for and even intimidation by the persona of Schoenberg, I felt it only honest to acknowledge that I profoundly disliked the sound of 12-tone music."

A more immediate source of inspiration for *Harmonielehre* was Adams's subconscious. At the time, the composer was fascinated by the writings of Carl Jung, particularly his analyses of Medieval mythology. Anfortas, whom Adams invokes in his movement title, is a classic Jungian archetype, the king whose wounds cannot heal. According to Adams, he "symbolized a condition of sickness of the soul that curses it with a feeling of impotence and depression."

The first part of *Harmonielehre* begins and ends with a brutal series of E minor chords; Adams calls these "the musical counterparts of a dream" in which he "watched a gigantic supertanker take off from the surface of San Francisco Bay and thrust itself into the sky like a Saturn rocket."

The last part was inspired by another dream, about Adams's baby daughter Emily. In the dream the infant, whose nickname then was Quackie, "rides perched on the shoulder of the Medieval mystic Meister Eckhardt, as they hover among the heavenly bodies like figures painted on the high ceilings of old cathedrals."

The Composer Speaks

"My own *Harmonielehre* is parody... in that it bears a 'subsidiary relation' to a model ..., but it does so without the intent to ridicule. It is a large, three-movement work for orchestra that marries the developmental techniques of Minimalism with the harmonic and expressive world of *fin de siècle* late Romanticism. It was a conceit that could only be attempted once. The shades of Mahler, Sibelius, Debussy, and the young Schoenberg are everywhere in this strange piece. This is a work that looks at the past in what I suspect is 'postmodernist' spirit, but, unlike *Grand Pianola Music* or *Nixon in China*, it does so entirely without irony.

"The first part is a 17-minute inverted arch form: high energy at the beginning and end, with a long, roaming '*Sehnsucht*' (yearning) section in between.... In this slow, moody movement entitled 'The Anfortas Wound,' a long, elegiac trumpet solo floats over a delicately shifting screen of minor triads that pass like spectral shapes from one family of instruments to the other. Two enormous climaxes rise up out of the otherwise melancholy landscape, the second one being an obvious homage to Mahler's last, unfinished symphony.

"The final part, "Meister Eckhardt and Quackie," begins with a simple berceuse (cradlesong) that is as airy, serene, and blissful as "The Anfortas Wound" is earthbound, shadowy, and bleak....The tender berceuse gradually picks up speed and mass... and culminates in a tidal wave of brass and percussion over a pedal point on E-flat major." —John Adams (excerpted from an essay on his website at earbox.com)

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