Richard Wagner: Prelude to Act I from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

Most of us probably hold clichéed ideas about Richard Wagner’s operas: Four to five hours of loud, lugubrious music from a brass-heavy orchestra, over which bulky singers dressed as Norse gods and goddesses attempt to bellow pretentious poetry set to tortuously complicated vocal lines. No one lives happily ever after, or, if they do it is because death has released them from the misery of human existence. Admittedly some of these clichés are true: Wagner’s characters, largely drawn from German and Norse mythology, do tend to be supernatural rather than human (though they all behave in remarkably human ways), and the majority of his operatic works (or *music dramas*, as he preferred to call them) end with the death of at least one or more of the principal characters. While the tendency for corpulence among opera singers is gradually becoming a thing of the past, it does take a powerful voice to be heard over the massed instrumental forces of Wagner’s orchestra. And while Wagner was a composer of rare genius, the poetry he wrote for his libretti leaves a great deal to be desired in both brevity and clarity.

*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (*The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*) stands out as the exception to these clichés. The characters are human, including one historical personage, Hans Sachs (1494 – 1576), the composer/cobbler whose character serves as the mouthpiece for Wagner’s own ideas about art and society. The orchestra for *Meistersinger* would be perfect to play a Brahms symphony, adding only a tuba and a harp. There are no supernatural elements involved – no ghost ships, magic rings, magic fire, love potions, Holy Grails, winged horses ridden by handmaidens of death, nor any of the other *dei ex machina* that populate Wagner’s other works. Instead, the drama is created and resolved through the interaction between human beings. While the singers still face challenges, the textures allow for lighter voices in some roles. At the end, the tenor gets the girl, they live happily ever after, and Hans Sachs is acclaimed by all for his art and his wisdom.

Besides portraying the love story between a young stranger/potential Mastersinger and the town goldsmith’s daughter, *Die Meistersinger*’s text encapsulates Wagner’s ideas about his music and the opposition to them from conservative musical minds like the Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick. Hanslick had been so outspoken in his condemnation of Wagner and his music that the first draft of *Die Meistersinger*’s libretto included a disagreeable character named Hanslich, the pedantic enforcer of the singers’ guild’s rules. Perhaps because of the possibility of legal action, Hanslich was later renamed Sigmus Beckmesser.

The Prelude to Act I encapsulates Wagner’s ideas about *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a total work of art), the concept that a music drama would unite and synthesize all of the arts: poetry, music, dance, visual art, etc. It serves as a microcosm of the drama, where the themes associated with different characters (what Wagner called *leitmotifs*) combine in counterpoint, just as characters interact onstage. Paradoxically, though it does reinforce Wagner’s concept of “the artwork of the future,”
the prelude bears hallmarks of Classical sonata form: an exposition of two contrasting themes, the first dramatic and the second more lyrical; a very contrapuntal development section which explores a variety of themes and keys; a recapitulation of the major ideas of the work, and a coda that harkens back to the opening.

The work opens with the majestic and surprisingly diatonic theme of the Mastersingers. As befits a learned society, this idea is presented in contrapuntal fashion, with countermelodies adorning the texture throughout the opening section. Following fanfares in the brass, a more lyrical theme is heard in the strings, composed of elements of Walther’s prize song that tells of his love for Eva. The climax of this lyrical theme is interrupted with a contrapuntal treatment of the dance music for the apprentice Mastersingers, interwoven with the prize song melody and the opening march. The prelude concludes with the Mastersinger’s theme emerging triumphantly in the brass, surrounded by swirling cascades of sound from the strings and woodwinds.

Christopher Rouse: Der gerettete Alberich (“Alberich Saved”)

One of Richard Wagners’ most interesting decisions as creator of Der Ring des Nibelungen was to leave unclear the fate of Alberich, the villainous dwarf who has set in motion the inexorable machinery of destiny, leading in the end to the apocalyptic cataclysm which concludes Götterdämmerung. As is so often the case in Wagner's operas, Alberich is more than a cardboard villain in the Italian mode — as memorable as he is, a Scarpia, for example, is thoroughly and irredeemably maleficent. Alberich, on the other hand — like Frederick of Telramund, or Klingsor, or even Fafner — is not entirely unsympathetic; however cruel his actions, they are often the result of mistreatment at the hands of others. It is the Rhinemaidens' heartless mockery of him that leads Alberich to the theft of the gold, and it is Wotan's treachery that goads Alberich into placing his mighty curse on the ring he has fashioned from the gold. (Indeed, Wotan is something of a mirror image to Alberich, an essentially sympathetic character whose actions are often devious, even ignoble.) Thus, it is possible with Alberich — and with many other Wagnerian villains — to recognize the inherent evil of his nature and deeds and yet still discern some measure of humanity in him and, in the process, to feel compassion for his plight.

As Alberich’s whereabouts are unknown at the end of the Ring, it occurred to me that it might be engaging to return him to the stage, so to speak, so that he might wreak further havoc in what is quite literally the godless world in which Wagner has left us in the final pages of Götterdämmerung. The result was Der gerettete Alberich, whose title might best be translated as "Alberich Saved," itself a reference to Georg Kaiser's expressionist play Der gerettete Alkibiades. Rather than a concerto, Der gerettete Alberich is more of a fantasy for solo percussionist and orchestra on themes of Wagner, with the soloist taking on the "role" of Alberich. Much of the musical material in the work is derived from a number of motives associated with Alberich in the Ring, among them the motives for the curse, the power of gold, the renunciation of love, annihilation, the Nibelungs, and, of course, the Ring itself. Only Wagner's Redemption through Love motive stands beyond the ken of the other, Alberich-related
motives I have used, though I have rather maliciously distorted it to suit the purposes of my "hero."

Notwithstanding the discernible tripartite structure of Der gerettete Alberich, this work is somewhat looser architecturally than other scores of mine to which I have appended the title "concerto" -- hence my decision to refer to it as a "fantasy." Having said all of the above, it would now be absurd of me to aver that this work is not programmatic; however, it is fair to say that it is not a narrative piece in the manner of, say, Strauss' Don Quixote. Beyond a brief passage in which Alberich serves a stint as a rock drummer (probably inspired, at least in part, by the wonderfully over-the-edge Wagner Reincarnated scenes in Ken Russell's film Lisztomania), I was not attempting to paint specific pictures in this score. However, the listener is free to provide whatever images he or she likes to the sonic goings-on.

Der gerettete Alberich was composed for percussionist Evelyn Glennie (to whom it is dedicated) and a commissioning consortium of the London Symphony Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. The soloist's battery consists of four wood blocks, four log drums, four tom-toms, two bongos, two timbales, a snare drum, a steel drum, a marimba, two guiros, a pedal-operated bass drum, and a drum set. The orchestration calls for piccolo, two flutes, three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, six horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, harp, timpani, percussion (three players), and strings. The percussion section makes use of chimes, antique cymbals, xylophone, castanets, tam-tam, bass drum, suspended cymbal, four tom-toms, anvil, and thunder sheet.

Completed on June 7, 1997, Der gerettete Alberich lasts approximately twenty-two minutes in performance.

Christopher Rouse

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Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: Scheherazade, Op. 35

In the European/American mind, The Arabian Nights conjures images of lonely camel caravans creeping across shimmering desert sands to the next oasis, where cooling breezes and swaying date palms await weary travelers. While it’s romantic to think that this collection of stories and folk legends was written down by a single scribe, in reality these tales were collected over the course of many centuries from versions of stories from Arabia, Persia, India and throughout southern Asia. The earliest known version dates from the ninth century; alternate versions of several tales appeared for the first time in the 2008 edition published by Penguin Press. These stories have been translated into languages as diverse as Hebrew and Japanese and the characters from The Arabian Nights still feature in our popular culture in cinematic versions from Ray Harryhausen’s The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad to Disney’s Aladdin.
As a member of the “Mighty Handful” (Moguchaya kuchka), the group of Russian nationalist composers identified by the critic Vladimir Stasso, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov had absorbed the melodic style of traditional Russian folk and liturgical music and had literally written the book on orchestration (his Principles of Orchestration, written in 1873). But like his fellow composers Alexander Borodin and Modest Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov had to balance composing with his public career, in his case as an officer in the Imperial Russian Navy. When he retired from military service in 1884, he devoted himself to composing and to teaching at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

In the winter of 1887-1888, Rimsky-Korsakov worked to revise and orchestrate Borodin’s Prince Igor, left unfinished by the composer at his death in February 1887. His explorations of the exotic melodies of Borodin’s opera led him to contemplate an orchestral work based on The Arabian Nights. He titled the piece after the heroine of the collection, whom Rimsky-Korsakov introduces to us on the opening page of the orchestral score:

_The Sultan Shahriar, convinced of the duplicity and infidelity of all women, vowed to slay each of his wives after the first night. The Sultana Scheherazade, however, saved her life by the expedient of recounting to the Sultan a succession of tales over a period of one thousand and one nights. Overcome by curiosity, the monarch postponed the execution of his wife from day to day, and ended by renouncing his sanguinary resolution altogether._

In his memoirs (My Musical Life, 1909), Rimsky-Korsakov spoke about what his musical intentions:

_The program I had been guided by in composing Scheherazade consisted of separate, unconnected episodes from the Tales of Arabian Nights scattered through all four movements of my suite: the sea and Sinbad’s ship, the fantastic narrative of Prince Kalander, the Prince and Princess, the Baghdad festival, the ship dashing itself against the rock ... yet presenting, as it were, a kaleidoscope of fairytale images...All I had desired was that the hearer ... should carry away the impression that it is beyond doubt an Oriental narrative of some numerous and varied fairytale wonders._

Rimsky-Korsakov chose not to describe the stories literally; the music conveys the mood rather than specific episodes in each story. The exception is the portrayal of the murderous Sultan, whose deadly resolve is intoned by the brass at the opening of the work, and also in the portrayal of Scheherazade, whose seductive, teasing tales are depicted by languorous violin cadenzas in each movement.

The four movements of Scheherazade can be seen as a four-movement symphony. After the Sultan’s wrath and Scheherazade’s gentle reply, the lower strings begin the rocking rhythm and sinuous melodic lines of _The Sea and Sinbad’s Ship_. A second theme is heard in the upper woodwinds, beginning with the flutes; these two ideas alternate and combine throughout the movement.
The Tale of the Kalendar Prince is introduced by the solo violin, followed by a wistful melody in the bassoon (a melancholy older relative of Stravinsky’s earthy Sacre du printemps soloist), taken up by the oboe and then the strings. After an agitated march punctuated by brass fanfares, Rimsky-Korsakov devises an astonishing episode: a clarinet cadenza over an unmetered pizzicato accompaniment in the strings. The march returns in a more fully developed form, and the cadenza does as well, this time with the bassoon as soloist. The opening bassoon melody returns at the end, but brilliantly orchestrated for the full ensemble. Scheherazade makes a brief appearance before the exhilarating rush to the final cadence.

The third movement (The Tale of the Young Prince and the Young Princess) begins with a ravishingly beautiful melody full of romantic yearning, first heard in the upper strings, but eventually taken up by the full orchestra. After a brief central episode which employs soft percussion sounds to great effect, the wistful opening melody returns to conclude the movement.

Festival in Baghdad starts with an ominous unison proclamation from the full orchestra, answered sweetly by Scheherazade’s solo violin. The orchestra plunges into a frenzied whirling dance full of changing meters and reminiscences of music from the other three movements. At the climax, the “sea music” from the first movement returns, and Sinbad’s ship meets disaster on the rocks. As the Sultan’s theme grows calmer, Scheherazade’s voice is heard for a final time, growing ever quieter as both she and the Sultan drift off into untroubled sleep.