

Playlet to Pocket Opera – Sunny Knable

Introduction

Good morning. Today I will be discussing my approach to composing music based on several of Thornton Wilder's short plays, exploring the initial inspirations, historical background, instrument choices and compositional techniques I employed to translate Wilder's work from playlet to pocket opera.

Definitions

What is a playlet? It is a very short play. Wilder described his as three-minute plays with three actors, and these he wrote throughout his life. What is pocket opera? Though it is not an established term, I use it to describe a short opera with minimal forces.

The playlets

My interest in adapting several of Thornton Wilder's playlets into this condensed and portable musical form began by reading his recently republished collection of short plays, "The Angel That Troubled the Waters and Other Plays" (published in 1998, with a new edition 2011). I was drawn to the playlets due to the many fantastical characters which are sketched, interact and disperse quickly, three characters and three minutes at a time. Just as with his full-length dramas, many of Wilder's playlets are on religious themes, whether in an overt or subtle fashion. My profession as a church Music Director served me well in recognizing all the musical potential inherent in *Proserpina and the Devil*, which I most recently set to music this year; *Leviathan* in 2013, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters* in 2012, and *The Flight into Egypt* in 2011. The most obvious to me, the one that leapt off the page initially was the slightly longer piece dealing with a composer and a story most of us know already: *Mozart and the Gray Steward*.

Mozart and the Gray Steward – synopsis

You may not have read this playlet, but most people are at least peripherally aware of the mysterious surroundings of Mozart's last commissioned piece, a *Requiem* mass for the dead, which on his own death in 1791, remained incomplete. This subject was immortalized in popular culture with Peter Shaffer's play-turned-movie, *Amadeus* in 1984. Wilder's depiction tells the tale of Mozart at home in the middle of orchestrating *The Magic Flute* when his wife, Constanze, enters announcing that there is a visitor at the front door. After some reticence, Mozart agrees to let him in. The Gray Steward enters and delivers a message from Count von Walsegg, commissioning Mozart to write a requiem for von Walsegg's late wife. The stipulation is that the work must remain anonymous. After some debate, Mozart agrees to take the commission and the Gray Steward leaves. Constanze is excited about the prospect, but Mozart having been ill, sees this commission as an omen of Death. She quiets him with reassurances; when she leaves, he sobs he drifts off to sleep. In his dream, the Gray Steward returns and lets his true character be known, that he is Death himself. Mozart begs for forgiveness and asks that he might live long enough to finish the *Requiem*, but the Gray Steward refuses.

Mozart and the Gray Steward – ensemble

The first step towards translating this story into musical form was to imagine the overall sound I desired and choose the forces which might produce that. Being a historical theme with potential to draw on classical repertoire, I knew I wanted some kind of small orchestra with reference to the period. I settled on a quartet for flute, violin, cello and harpsichord. To reference *The Magic Flute* and not have a flute in the ensemble seemed out of the question. Harpsichord and cello would serve as my basso continuo, an anachronistic accompaniment to Baroque and early classical period operas which Mozart utilized. Pictured here are is a common figure which would imply a basso continuo bass line to be played by the low strings and the left hand of the keyboard instrument, with figures applying to the right hand of the keyboard. Violin along with the cello would be needed to reference the orchestral string sound. In terms of voice type, I imagined Mozart as a high and light tenor, Constanze as a dramatic soprano (as she was in life), and the Gray Steward as an ominous baritone.

Mozart and the Gray Steward – tonality

After the forces had been decided, the next step was to establish the musical language I would be using throughout the piece. In the contemporary classical world, we call this part of the process “pre-composition”. In Mozart’s day, every composer worked with an assumption that they would be operating in the major/minor tonal system which had been established before the Baroque period. Since the breakdown of the tonal system at the end of the late Romantic period, and the systematic rebuilding of various alternative modes of operation, composers in the 21st Century have been confronted with the problem of establishing their own language, and sometimes as specific as to the piece and its needs. In the case of *Mozart and the Gray Steward*, after much improvisation at the piano, I decided on the basic principle that I would be quoting from the original source material on one level and commenting on that material in other keys simultaneously. This is called bitonality.

I imagine at this point some of you are bracing yourselves for a dissonance-filled composition. To some degree, you are right. I assure you though that not all bitonality is the same, for it would depend on which two keys you are combining. For those even with minimal knowledge of the piano, you can picture playing a C major scale in one hand and G major in another – the only dissonant clash would be between F and F#, and that clash you could either choose to avoid or exploit depending on your intentions. In the case of this piece, after much experimentation, I decided on some basic principles – that Mozart’s music would be combined with music a Major 3rd away; a tertian relationship. Tertian harmony is the building block of tonality: the combination of notes to make chords, root, 3rd and 5th. Picture a C major chord in one hand and an E major chord in the other – because the relationship between keys is a 3rd, there is significant overlap and thus less dissonance. Constanze’s music I decided would be a Major second away, the difference between C Major and D Major; only two clashing notes. The Gray Steward’s music would be a tritone apart, which you might know is the most dissonant interval you can have in the tonal system, carrying with it the connotation of the “Devil’s” interval – how appropriate.

Mozart and the Gray Steward – source material/historical background

The final step before composing was to assemble the source material from which I would be quoting – *The Magic Flute* and the *Requiem*. One important historical aspect of the *Requiem* to keep in mind was that Mozart only completed the first two movements before his death—the *Requiem aeternam* and *Kyrie*—and had sketches for the third movement, *Sequentia*. The rest was finished by his copyist after death, Franz Süssmayr, the Austrian composer and former pupil of Mozart’s contemporary and competitor, Antonio Salierri. No wonder there were rumors after the Maestro’s death. In the score, one can almost see Mozart losing strength and trailing off into the darkness at the *Lacrimosa*, of which he composed only the first eight measures! Of course, I would only be drawing from the Mozart in my piece.

Mozart and the Gray Steward – quotes

Finally, I was ready to begin composing. For a month, I sat at my piano two to four hours a day, handwriting the score for *Mozart and the Gray Steward* with copies of *The Magic Flute* and the *Requiem* on hand. Here is Mozart’s opening four measures of the Overture to *The Magic Flute*,  and here is my reinterpretation of it, which sets the stage of this little drama.  From there, I transition quickly to music based on the famous Papageno theme, for Mozart is to be sitting at his table orchestrating *The Magic Flute* . I took the liberty of imagining him humming as he worked.  Constanze is the next to enter. A soprano, in life, I chose for her the bubbly theme from the Queen of the Night aria , and have her singing from offstage while she is walking on . For the rest of the opening scene, I oscillate from Papegeno music for Mozart’s character to the Queen of the Night music for Constanze, as they discuss the mysterious man at the door. When the Gray Steward is finally let in, the tempo slows as I transition into music based on the *Requiem*.  You can hear that my treatment is not quite revealing the Gray Steward’s true character yet; I am saving the dissonance for later in the piece.  Let us hear now the opening few minutes. 

When the Gray Steward leaves, the couple converse again, Constanze excitedly and Mozart anxiously. Again, I have them oscillating between *The Magic Flute* music to represent Constanze's joyfulness, and the second movement of the *Requiem* to represent Mozart's anxiety. —□— After Mozart has worked himself up into a frenzy, Constanze calms him with a sweet melody. —□— In my treatment, you might notice that the commentary from the flute is one step higher than Constanze. —□— As the character Mozart drifts off to sleep sobbing, we hear the final melody that Mozart the composer probably ever wrote, from opening of the *Lacrimosa*, —□— and here is my treatment. —□— As the dream begins, the Gray Steward is revealed as Death himself, and thus my treatment of the *Requiem* changes into bitonal music at the tritone. —□— I could compare and contrast for the length of another whole essay, but suffice it to say that I continue in similar fashion throughout the piece. At the conclusion, Mozart begs the Gray Steward to let him finish the *Requiem*, but Death refuses. I took artistic license to add Constanze to this twisted dream, singing from her lullaby music offstage, as Mozart and the Gray Stewart repeat their final words. It makes for an effective finale. —□—

Mozart and the Gray Steward – vocal writing

Before moving on, I imagine some of you might be wondering how I adapt the written word to a sung vocal line. In the case of this piece, I would look for material from Mozart himself and alter it to suit the natural rhythm of each line of text. In the opening line, for example, Constanze says, "There's someone to see you, someone important. Pray God, it's a commission from the court." Notice the inherent accents in each syllable, "There's **some**one to **see** you. Pray **God**, it's a **com**mission from the **court**." Notice that I set everyone one of those accents either on the down beat, the strongest beat in each measure, or on a higher note in the phrase. I also repeat, "Pray God," for dramatic effect, and to even out the phrase. Each line is set with many considerations of rhythm, text painting (matching the meaning of the word in musical language), tessitura (the place where the line sits in the voice) and the overall vocal shape.

Mozart and the Gray Steward – performances

This work was performed several times, first with the Jackson Heights Repertory Theatre in Queens, 2011, and then again in the same year with the Queens College New Music Group at the CUNY Graduate Center in midtown Manhattan. It is relatively simple to assemble with a conductor and I could imagine it being performed in a variety of spaces, from large or small theatres, to unorthodox performance spaces, or perhaps a bar or an outdoor space. I think it would be especially great to stage this inside a historical space to mimic the composer's lodgings.

Other Playlets

While time does not permit me to go in depth into the other pocket operas I completed on Wilder's colorful playlets, I would like to offer an abbreviated tour. After the artistic success of *Mozart and the Gray Steward*, I desired to adapt the last group of playlets which feel quite related as a group: *The Flight Intro Egypt*, *The Angel That Troubled the Waters*, and *Leviathan*.

Flight Into Egypt – general

The Flight Into Egypt is a comical tale depicting Jesus, Mary and Joseph escaping Herod and his soldiers with their getaway vehicle: Hepzibah, a frustratingly stubborn and loquacious, complaining donkey. After much back and forth with the talking donkey, pleading with her to hurry, and Herod hot on their heels, the Holy group finally arrives at their destination. In adapting this story into music, I went through similar steps as with *Mozart*. The ensemble I arrived at is a trio for oboe, piano and hand percussion, which includes the Riqq, a middle Eastern tambourine with a pliable lizard head, a Tar, which is a North African frame drum, and my more holy sounding instruments – triangle and finger cymbals. With the aid of typical North African drum patterns and the modality of the Egyptian scale, this small ensemble sets the exotic, ancient scene quite effectively. □ Hepzibuh, a soprano, is often set using this Egyptian scale with large leaps from high to low, imitating the cartoon-like “hee-haw” of a talking, and now singing donkey. □ Joseph, a bass-baritone, who has just as little to do as he does in the Bible, occasionally offers reproach with plodding repetitive figures. □ Mary, an angelic soprano, I set in the Lydian mode of Bb and is accompanied by triangles or finger cymbals. □ In a final moment before their destination is reached, the ensemble remarks that “it’s a queer world where the survival of the Lord is dependent upon donkeys, but so it is.” □ This was only performed once with the Queens College New Music Group, with Maestro Maurice Peress conducting. I could picture it being performed well in an outdoor amphitheater or equally alongside Holy works, middle Eastern works or in a small space, theater or not.

Angel That Troubled the Waters – general

The Angel That Troubled the Waters is a Holy and reverent tale about a Newcomer and the Mistaken-Invalid who wait around the healing pool. The Newcomer asks the pool to heal his heart in pain. The Invalid awakes and describes his dream, that the Angel had come to cure him. The crowd mocks him, “He’s mistaken. Beat Him! Throw him out into the porch,” they yell. When the Angel comes down from heaven, the Newcomer begs to be cured, but the Angel refuses for, “without your wound, where would your power be?” she asks. Then it is the Invalid who receives a hand, “new as a child’s”. Given the overt Holy nature of this playlet, I settled on accompanying the three vocalists with organ only, an instrument that is unique in its near exclusive association with the church. The Newcomer, a tenor, is set with repetitive, somber and pleading figures. —□— The Invalid, a bass is set with dreamy, delusional figures of false hope. —□— The Angel is pure and in the Major mode, with a high soprano tessitura. —□— When the Angel grants her gift to the Invalid, we hear triumphant chords and exclamations from the Invalid and the small choir. —□— This piece has been performed once as part of a concert in a church. I am currently adapting it for a full choir in a concert setting which will be performed by Cerddorion Vocal Ensemble with Dr. James John conducting next season.

Leviathan – general

Leviathan is a somber tale set somewhere out at sea after a great shipwreck. A Prince wakes to find himself alone on an island with a Mermaid. The Prince is bewildered and calls out to his lost shipmates, while the Mermaid bargains with the Prince to attempt to take his soul. The Prince explains that the soul cannot be given away. In frustration, she makes the waters rise and drowns the Prince. She calls upon the subservient Leviathan who complains about the wreckage harming her young. The Mermaid orders her to take the Prince down to feed her children. Now that the Mermaid is alone again, she hums her mermaid song, combing her hair, pondering on the soul of man.

For the ensemble, I chose a dark combination of an amplified solo cello and percussion, which includes an ocean drum, a foot rattle, and an autoharp. The musical material and form is mathematically derived; that and the many modern effects contribute to the dark tone of this piece. In the opening, we hear the principal 12-tone row (comprised of all 12 notes of the chromatic scale) as sung by the Leviathan, a soprano. [II] Modern effects set the stage as the Mermaid watches the Prince. [II] The Prince, here a contralto with the same range as a tenor, wakes and sputters in confusion. [II] As the waters rise, the auto harp and the glassy sounding *sul ponticello* bowing of the cello creates a magic, dark wash of sound. [II] After the mermaid sings her wordless song, she ponders, "Perhaps it is better, although your body has passed to Leviathan, still to have another part of you somewhere about the world." [II] This final piece in the 4-part Holy series of pocket operas was performed twice. It was premiered through Rhymes with Opera a small company based in Hartford, CT and New York City, during their 2013 Summer workshop, and then repeated on another recital in Forest Hills, NY.

Proserpina and the Devil – general

In a change to form, I composed incidental music for another of Wilder's playlets this year, *Prosperina and the Devil*, which can be performed by the instrumentalists themselves as actors and players. Being a play about a marionette show gone wrong, I choose the string players, cello and piano, to represent the marionette manipulators, and the clarinetist to be the narrator. This has been performed many times across the country with several different groups, including Unheard-of//Ensemble based in New York City, Cantos Y Cuentos based in Atlanta, GA, and most recently with the Long Island Composers Alliance. Modern classical groups are often looking for a way to stand out from the crowd, and being a cutting-edge group which can act, move, sing and play their instruments all in the same piece has proven effective.

Future projects

This year, I am planning on composing incidental music on where the players have the option of acting, based on the playlet *The Penny That Beauty Spent*. In the near future, I would love to put together an album of these works and have them out in the public eye in a greater extent. I believe they can work well as stand-alone pieces in unconventional settings, as accompaniment to other dramatic or concert works – for example, pairing *Mozart and the Gray Steward* as a preshow to *The Magic Flute* or even the *Requiem*. I think would make a great evening of entertainment.

Conclusion

I find great reward in returning to the playlets of Thornton Wilder again and again. They are compact in ensemble, condensed in drama, and fantastically varied in content. What was an ongoing project for Wilder all throughout his life, has turned into an ongoing project for me as well. I give great thanks to the Thornton Wilder Estate for granting me permission to use them as material. Thank you.

Questions?