

Program notes for The Romance of Araby – OCS Concert February 20, 2012.

Shortly after I had been hired as Associate Director of the Ottawa Choral Society, I attended one of their choir parties and chatted with Maggie McCoy – an OCS stalwart – over a glass of wine and some unidentified hors d'oeuvres. “Yes, I’ve done quite a bit of Andrew Ager’s work,” I said, “and people really seem to like it; in fact, he just approached me about the possible writing of a massive work based on Omar Khayyam’s ‘Rubaiyat.’ And that’s pretty much all it took to get us to tonight’s performance. It was something big, fresh, and new – a favourable idea.

But Rubaiyat was only half a show; what does one program to contrast and complement a large work that has yet to be written, and incorporate a small orchestra, chorus and two superb soloists? And it came to pass that a relatively obscure composer called Mozart should fill out the rest of the evening. I thought he should be given a chance because he died young and people subsequently forgot about him, but I maintain that his music still holds up, even by today’s standards.

The magic number 25 was chosen as to how many instruments would make up the orchestra, and I set about looking at Mozart’s opera scores only to find that the famous overtures and choruses usually consisted of 30 or more players, (hence the ‘Classical’ size of the original National Arts Centre Orchestra). But not every movement needed trombones, or trumpets, or clarinets – in fact, the clarinet was a relatively new wind instrument, invented about a half century before Mozart’s birth, and not a standard orchestral fixture until Beethoven’s time. So for historic and economic reasons, the clarinet has lost out tonight, and to those single-reed lovers in the audience, I apologize sincerely.

Here are mercifully brief notes of the five Mozart works represented tonight: *Thamos, King of Egypt* is not an opera, but incidental music for a play which Mozart wrote when he was only 20. It is all about throne usurpers, high priests and priestesses, and treachery in high places set against exotic backgrounds. (Apparently, the music was also used for another play set in India!) This exoticism was the stuff that Mozart would eventually scavenge to create *The Magic Flute* – a labyrinthine story involving a questing Prince who endures the company of a man dressed as a giant bird; a vengeful future mother-in-law who would make any sane man turn around and run home; a handful of Masonic kidnappers, and a couple of cute trophy sopranos who are released from their bonds in time for the final triumphant chorus.

Based on Greek mythology, Idomeneo – King of Crete – was the ally of Agamemnon, who was the brother of King Menelaus, who was the husband of Helen, who was carried off by Paris, who was the son of King Priam of Troy. All one needs to know for tonight is that Idomeneo, after ten long years of war, is on his way home but gets shipwrecked. He is saved by Neptune, god of the sea, after vowing to sacrifice to him the first man that he comes across. That man turns out to be his own son, Idamante, (a pants role) who has come to the shore seeking solitude after hearing of his father’s death. Idomeneo is horrified that he must kill his son, and at first he does not reveal his identity. He finally does so, but Idamante – knowing nothing of the promise to Neptune – does not understand why his father pushes him away so harshly and sings *Il padre adorato*. The

Cretans, meanwhile, praise Neptune for the return of their king with the final chorus from Act I – *Nettuno s'onori*. The final chorus of the entire opera is *Scenda amor*.

Don Giovanni isn't so lucky. Essentially, he is a lecherous man who gets stonewalled by the statue of the man he kills (the powerful father of one of Giovanni's prospects) and is dragged down to Hell. The duet *Per queste tue manine*, between Leporello (Giovanni's manservant) and Zerlina is usually cut from modern productions, which makes it all the more interesting since it is a jewel rarely seen or heard.

The Abduction of the Seraglio, written by Mozart at 26, was possibly conceived by the Emperor of "too many notes" fame, Joseph II himself. It was intended for a visit to Austria by Grand Duke Paul Petrovich of Russia, at which the two empires would discuss how to divide the Ottoman land. The subject, a man attempting to rescue his love from an Ottoman harem – yes, another search and rescue mission – inspired Mozart to include in his opera Western imitations of Turkish music. The aria *Wer ein liebchen hat gefunden* is sung by Osmin, the bloodthirsty yet lovable buffo character who advises the listener to "reward your love with kisses and make her life great." It also advises the young lover to lock up your woman's other lovers, lest they tempt her to forget her faithfulness.

I hope you enjoy these fantastic, exotic, life-affirming excerpts from Mozart's operas as much as I enjoyed choosing them.

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Symphony no.1 (The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam) – Andrew Ager

Omar Khayyam (1048-1131) was a renowned Persian astronomer, mathematician, and poet. The "Rubaiyat" is a freely translated collection of his verse, most commonly known in the version by the English literary flaneur Edward Fitzgerald. Independently wealthy, Fitzgerald (1809-1883) devoted his energies to researching medieval near-east history and literature, and, perhaps unwittingly, was therefore significant as a mid 19th-century self-taught scholar of an as yet obscure subject.

The title comes from the Arabic "ruba'i", meaning roughly "quatrain", the form of these collected verses. Fitzgerald did not intend to make a direct translation of the poems but rather, in his own words, "My translation will interest you from its form, and also in many respects in its detail: very un-literal as it is. Many quatrains are mashed together: and something lost, I doubt, of Omar's simplicity, which is so much a virtue in him". And, "I suppose very few People have ever taken such Pains in Translation as I have: though certainly not to be literal. But at all Cost, a Thing must live: with a transfusion of one's own worse Life if one can't retain the Original's better. Better a live Sparrow than a stuffed Eagle".

The themes of life's brevity, and the brevity of youth, feature strongly in the "Rubaiyat". The tone is not tragic but rather darkly amusing and occasionally wistful. The poet sings the praises

of wine, comments drolly on the passing of mighty rulers, and freely admits to a certain incomprehensibility of life.

The composer has selected verses for their lyric quality and composed a form of choral symphony. The purely instrumental movements may be performed separately, yet they introduce the musical subjects that appear in each succeeding choral movement. One might summarize the work as follows:

I, II - The mezzo soloist provides a light and flowing depiction of the “Rose that blows about us”, and the choir a hint of sombre thoughts concerning the seeming shortness of life, and its uncertainty.

III, IV - A Scherzo which features the bemused soloist, accompanied by a faintly mocking children’s chorus. In the middle section the full choir councils one to “leave the wise to wrangle”, after which they are joined again by the children’s voices. The movement ends as though drifting away into endless space.

V, VI - Using one of the best-known verses from the “Rubaiyat”, this movement is an elegy. The solemn tones of the men’s voices are interrupted briefly by a duet for the soloists, but return again and intone a mournful conclusion to this movement.

VII - A vigorous fugue, whose energy apparently makes light of the poet’s inability to understand the mysteries of life. The middle section features a more reflective mood, which is soon dispelled by the return of the driving fugue.

VIII-IX - The baritone soloist and choir sing a refrain extolling the pleasures of life,

“Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse - and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness -
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.”

They are interrupted by the clamour of various clay pots arguing amongst themselves about who created them and why, but these are in turn silenced by the return of the “Rose that blows about us”, ending in a teasing duet between the mezzo soloist and the children’s voices.

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