

Quad City Symphony Orchestra
PROGRAM NOTES
Masterworks II: Fantasies & Fables

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ENGELBERT HUMPERDINCK
(1854-1921)

Prelude to *Hänsel und Gretel*

Instrumentation: Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings.

Premiere: December 23, 1893, German National Theatre, Weimar, with Richard Strauss conducting.

QCSO Performance History: QCSO Masterworks concerts have previously featured the *Hänsel und Gretel* Prelude six times: with Ludwig Becker conducting in 1917 and 1922, with Oscar Anderson conducting in 1948, with Charles Gigante conducting in 1956 and 1961, and most recently with James Dixon conducting in 1992.

Often composers are accounted as influential by numbering their students. Composers like J.S. Bach, Franz Josef Haydn, Arnold Schoenberg, Nadia Boulanger, and Olivier Messiaen all exerted enormous influence on the development of music by virtue of their many protégés, and often (as was the case with Boulanger) the more divergent the music of their students, the greater the influence.



Engelbert Humperdinck
(Julius C. Schaarwächter)

On the other hand, a number of important composers never offered formal instruction in music, but came rather to be seen as influential by accumulating a different kind of “student”: younger artists who, in responding to their more provocative or inspired work, became shameless imitators or noisy detractors. Richard Wagner is precisely this kind of composer: though never a teacher himself, his music effectively taught several generations of composers, including those who made of his works objects of devotion (Richard Strauss, for example), as well as those who begrudgingly acknowledged his influence while stubbornly fighting against it (Claude Debussy among them).

But if anyone ever came close to being a real student of Wagner’s, it would have been a man called Engelbert Humperdinck, a name so unforgettable that it was later co-opted as the stage name of the twentieth-century British pop star formerly known as Arnold Dorsey. The original Humperdinck was born near Bonn, Germany in 1854. His first encounter with Wagner was in 1880 in Naples, and shortly thereafter he went to work as an assistant at Wagner’s magnificently

opulent Bayreuth Festival Opera House. After Wagner died in 1883, Humperdinck was esteemed enough by the Wagner family to serve as musical tutor to the composer's son, Siegfried, in 1889. By far his most well-known work, the opera *Hänsel und Gretel*, premiered in 1893 and has been a global repertory staple ever since, especially around Christmastime. Though he continued to compose operas, Humperdinck never duplicated the success of *Hänsel und Gretel*, and none of his other works are frequently performed today.

Quite obviously, the children's fairy tale that provided Humperdinck with the subject for his masterpiece would not have suited his idol, Wagner. Though Wagner's operas were almost always set in fantasy worlds, the lightness and naïve simplicity of Humperdinck's libretto would probably have struck Wagner as puerile. But while *Hänsel und Gretel* does include many moments of distinctly un-Wagnerian elegance and guilelessness, Humperdinck clearly owed much to his hero's influence, particularly in his use of the orchestra and in certain far-reaching harmonic progressions.

Hänsel und Gretel Prelude Listening Guide

♫ **ORCHESTRATION:** The prelude famously begins with a chorale-like moment for the horns, which is actually an instrumental version of the "Children's Prayer" that ends Act I of the opera. Notice how the bassoons, then the strings, then various wind instruments slowly join the chorale. This is one of the two main ways composers can craft **crescendos** (increases in volume): by asking the

players to play louder, or by adding more instruments.

♫ **HARMONY:** Following the chorale, a sudden, lively tempo change ushers in the main body of the prelude. Amid a jaunty trumpet solo, listen for the sweeping, snake-like lines in the strings and woodwinds; these are **chromatic scales**, or series of half-steps. Wagner often used them for highly dramatic, almost overwhelming expressive purposes, but they serve a whimsical, fairy-tale like function for Humperdinck.

♫ **MELODY:** Humperdinck's prelude (and the opera that follows it) is full of folkish, charming melodies. Their appeal is most certainly one of the reasons the opera was an immediate popular success.

MICHAEL ABELS (b. 1962)

Frederick's Fables

Text by Leo Lionni (1910-1999)

I. "Frederick"

IV. "Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse"

Instrumentation: Two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, two percussion, narrator, celesta, harp, and strings.

Premiere: "Frederick" premiered in 1994 on the Plymouth (MN) Music Series, with Philip Brunelle conducting and James Earl Jones as narrator. "Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse" premiered with the same conductor and organization in 1996, with Garrison Keillor narrating.

QCSO Premiere.

Italian artist Leo Lionni was uniquely capable of thriving in both high-art and commercial environments. Born in the Netherlands, he spent his teen years and young adulthood in

Italy, where he built a strong reputation as a painter in the current futurist style, with its dynamic subjects, bold colors, and clearly-drawn lines. He later emigrated to Philadelphia where he was equally successful as an advertising artist, including for American auto manufacturers. Only late in life did he turn to writing and illustrating children's books, conquering yet another area of artistic endeavor: in addition to his prior honors and successes, he also became a four-time winner of the Caldecott Medal for most distinguished picture book.

Like Lionni, composer Michael Abels has achieved great success in a variety of artistic contexts, navigating freely between the worlds of concert and film music. In the mid-1990s, Abels took four of Lionni's picture books and composed music to be played while they were read aloud. Initially narrated



Michael Abels, with childhood friend Mark Russell Smith (Personal photo)

by James Earl Jones and Garrison Keillor, each of the four vignettes can be performed alone or in combination.

Lionni's gently offbeat children's books often focus on themes of self-realization, individual uniqueness, and unexpected transformations. His storylines, though never sensational, are full of curious narrative turns and charming revelations. Each of these characteristics is evident also in Abels' work; he often attaches a musical idea to a particular character or group of characters, contrasting sparse and plaintive music with occasional fantastical elements or exuberant, dance-like passages.

Frederick's Fables Listening Guide

Frederick

♪ *METER*: The sprightly music depicting the family of field mice and their habitat has a steady **beat**, but Abels will often change **meter**, or how the beats are divided into groups. These two features give this passage the dual qualities of steady forward motion and whimsical unpredictability.

♪ *ORCHESTRATION*: Although the narrator in these fables is usually amplified using a microphone, Abels is extremely sensitive in controlling the volume of sound in the orchestra, careful to not overshadow or drown out the narration. This often means that more members of the orchestra are resting than playing. This approach is also common in film music.

♪ *EXPRESSION*: Notice how Abels frequently contrasts two kinds of music: employing one **affect** ("mood") associated with the daydreaming Frederick,

and another with his industrious relatives.

Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION:** To depict the wind-up mouse, Abels uses the **rachet**, a percussion instrument often used for comical effects. One difficulty in playing the rachet is in dynamic control: it must be turned somewhat quickly in order to produce a steady sound, but the resulting volume can easily be undesirably loud.

♪ **RHYTHM:** During the fairytale-like lizard music, Abels combines very rapid, rhythmically-offset lines in the flute and oboe, each repeated many times. This provides the illusion of continuous, frantic activity, but also allows for the players to stagger their breaths.

♪ **FORM:** Unlike in "Frederick", which Abels ends abruptly at the end of Lionni's text, here he takes the end of the story as an opportunity for an extended instrumental dance.

WILLIAM GRANT STILL (1895-1978)

Poem for Orchestra

Instrumentation: Three flutes (second and third flutes doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, three clarinets, two bassoons (second bassoon doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta, and strings.

Premiere: December 7, 1944, Cleveland Orchestra, with Rudolph Ringwall conducting.

QCSO Premiere.

Active during the middle years of the twentieth century, William Grant Still was one of the most successful and prolific American composers, and a pioneer for Black artists in

American classical music. Born in 1895 in Mississippi, he trained first for medicine at Wilberforce University before abandoning his studies there to study music at Oberlin College. Over the course of his long career, he composed prolifically and earned many honors, including three Guggenheim Fellowships and nine honorary doctoral degrees. Perhaps his most emblematic work is his grand opera on the tumultuous Haitian Revolution, *Troubled Island*, with a libretto by none other than Langston Hughes. At its premiere in 1949 by the New York City Opera, it was the first opera by a Black composer performed by a major opera company in the United States.

"My basic musical training emphasized quite naturally European musical culture," said Still in an interview with Voice of America Radio in 1949, "but this failed to satisfy me completely as a basis of an idiom for expressing myself. Therefore, I sought to create an idiom unmistakably American."

Still's "unmistakably American" style is highly evident in his 1944 *Poem for Orchestra*. Commissioned by the Cleveland Orchestra, *Poem* is one of his most-often-



William Grant Still
(williamgrantstillmusic.com)

performed works. It bears no specific “program”, meaning Still did not expressly specify a story underlying the work. But nonetheless, Still takes his audience on a highly emotional journey using the languages both of traditional classical music and the American soundscape, particularly mid-century Hollywood, where he frequently found employment as a film score orchestrator.

Poem for Orchestra Listening Guide

♫ **FORM:** Still seems to follow a rhapsodic form in this work, allowing himself great freedom in the presentation and development of motives and in harmonic progression. This is similar to the formal principles followed by Liszt, Richard Strauss, and others who composed what they called “symphonic poems” instead of the more formally-conventional symphonies.

♫ **HARMONY:** Throughout the work, Still uses what most listeners will find to be familiar chords and chord progressions. He contrasts passages with frequent and sometimes fleeting key changes with long passages, particularly those with sweeping melodies, in a single key.

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

Romeo and Juliet, Fantasy-Overture

Instrumentation: Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion, harp, and strings.

Premiere: The first version of this work premiered March 4, 1870 by the Russian Musical Society in Moscow, with Nikolai Rubenstein conducting. The second version premiered two years later, on February 17, 1872 in St. Petersburg, with Eduard Nápravník conducting. The last and now-standard version did not premiere until May 1, 1886, in the city of Tbilisi, then under Russian rule (now the capital of the nation of Georgia).

QCSO Performance History: This is the fourteenth time the QCSO has programmed Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Past performances were conducted by Ludwig Becker (1922 and 1927), Frank Laird Waller (1937), Oscar Anderson (1940 and 1949), Piero Bellugi (1954), Charles Gigante (1961), James Dixon (1970, 1980, and 1993), Donald Scheicher (2006), and Mark Russell (2012 and 2015). The latter performance was on the special 100th Anniversary program that also featured cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

With the possible exception of his Symphony No. 1 (“Winter Dreams”), the fantasy-overture to *Romeo and Juliet* is Tchaikovsky’s earliest major contribution to orchestral literature. The work was highly formative for the composer; the highly successful work we know today is actually the product of several major revisions.

Much is made of the aesthetic divide between the composers of the Russian “Mighty Five” (Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Cui) and the more-refined,

more Westernized Tchaikovsky. While it is true that their music demonstrates very different artistic aims and approaches to Russian subjects, Tchaikovsky and members of the Mighty Five actually maintained a great amount of mutual respect throughout their careers. This was particularly true for Tchaikovsky with Mily Balakirev. Though only three years older than Tchaikovsky, Balakirev maintained a commanding force over him early in his career and was the recipient of several dedications from the younger composer, including the *Romeo and Juliet* overture.

“Balakirev is leaving today,” wrote Tchaikovsky to his brother Anatoli early in 1869. “How tiring he is and yet I have to be fair, he is an honest and good man and as an artist soars above the ordinary level.” During the visit, Balakirev had suggested that



Tchaikovsky in 1863
(Getty Images)

Tchaikovsky write an overture to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, a suggestion Tchaikovsky undertook in earnest.

The following October he wrote to Balakirev, “My overture is coming along quite quickly; the greater part is already composed in outline and, if nothing happens to hinder me, I am hopeful that within a month and a half it will be ready. When it has emerged from my womb, you will see that, whatever else it may be, a great deal of it has been carried out in accordance with your instructions.” These “instructions” were extensive suggestions made by the older composer to Tchaikovsky in response to drafts of the work; he says “a great deal” because there were plenty of Balakirev’s suggestions that he ignored.

The 1870 world premiere of the work in Moscow was not particularly successful, due in part at least to performance circumstances beyond Tchaikovsky’s control. But regardless of the reason for its lukewarm reception, Tchaikovsky took the opportunity to revise the work, adding a slow introduction and rebalancing his use of the famous “Love Theme”. This version, premiered in 1872, saw significantly more international performances, including in New York. It wasn’t until 1880, however, that the work took its final, present form. As the score was being prepared for publication, Tchaikovsky wrote to Balakirev. “I want you to know that I have not forgotten who was responsible for this score coming into the world,” he wrote, “that I keenly remember your friendly sympathy at the time—a sympathy which I hope has even now not quite been extinguished.”

Romeo and Juliet Listening Guide

♪ **FORM:** Tchaikovsky follows a traditional sonata form in this work, so it may feel a bit like the first movement of a symphony: slow introduction, an “exposition” of multiple themes, a “development” wherein the themes are intertwined, and a “recapitulation” where they are restated in more or less their original form. However, being able to identify these sections in the moment is not necessary for enjoying the piece! If you’re hearing the work for the first time, a great approach is simply to listen moment to moment, with some attention to what you’re presently hearing compares to what you’ve already heard. If you cultivate this habit, you will find that you will begin to hear connections across entire pieces.

♪ **ORCHESTRATION:** Just like the Humperdinck prelude, this piece begins with a chorale, but one of a profoundly different character: rather than the luminous, comforting horns we heard in *Hansel*, we hear somber clarinets and bassoons. This chorale is descriptive of Friar Lawrence, the cleric who aids Romeo and Juliet in their secret marriage.

♪ **TEMPO:** As the drama increases from the solemn opening passages, notice how Tchaikovsky uses the timpani to ratchet up the tension. At the same time, he is effecting a transition from the slow tempo of the opening to the furiously fast main section is extremely smooth. He does this through a series of subtle tempo fluctuations.

♪ **MELODY:** For all the many things we can observe about Tchaikovsky’s craft as a composer, his supreme gift is in his

melodies. The “Love Theme”, first played by the violas (of course!) and the English horn, is one of Tchaikovsky’s most well-known melodies. Very few composers have crafted tunes that express so much in so short a time.

♪ **EXPRESSION:** The central section of this work (“development”) provides maximal contrast to the “Love Theme”; setting aside the cathartic, sweeping . When the melody returns, Tchaikovsky presents it differently; having been battered by the warring factions around them, Romeo and Juliet’s theme takes on a profound sense of tragedy.

♪ **INSTRUMENTATION:** At the piece’s conclusion, the thunderous timpani again takes center stage following the harp’s final heaven-ascending arpeggios. The work ends on a **unison** (single note, in this case in multiple octaves) in all the instruments: a fateful B natural.