

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2014-2015 Subscription Series

January 23 and 25, 2015

JAMES GAFFIGAN, CONDUCTOR
GABRIELA MONTERO, PIANO

MASON BATES

White Lies for Lomax

MAURICE RAVEL

Concerto in G major for Piano and Orchestra

I. Allegmente

II. Adagio assai

III. Presto

Ms. Montero

Intermission

RICHARD WAGNER

“Good Friday Spell” from *Parsifal*

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Opus 107, “Reformation”

I. Andante — Allegro con fuoco

II. Allegro vivace

III. Andante —

IV. Choral: “Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott” (Andante con moto) —
Allegro vivace — Allegro maestoso

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

MASON BATES

Born 23 January 1977 in Philadelphia

White Lies for Lomax (composed for piano in 2007; arranged for orchestra in 2009)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Walnut Creek, California, 10 March 2009; California Symphony; Barry Jekowsky, conductor

THESE PERFORMANCES MARK THE PSO PREMIERE

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 7 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celesta and strings

Mason Bates brings not only his own fresh talent to the concert hall but also the musical sensibilities of a new generation — he is equally at home composing “for Lincoln Center,” according to his web site (www.masonbates.com), as being the “electronica artist Masonic® who moved to the San Francisco Bay Area from New York City, where he was a lounge DJ at such venues as The Frying Pan — the floating rave ship docked off the pier near West 22nd Street.”

Bates was born in Philadelphia in 1977 and started studying piano with Hope Armstrong Erb at his childhood home in Richmond, Virginia. He earned degrees in both English literature and music composition in the joint program of Columbia University and the Juilliard School, where his composition teachers included John Corigliano, David Del Tredici and Samuel Adler, and received his doctorate in composition from the University of California, Berkeley in 2008 as a student of Edmund Campion and Jorge Lidermann. Bates was Resident Composer with the California Symphony (2008-2011), Project San Francisco Artist-in-Residence with the San Francisco Symphony (2011-2012), and Composer of the Year with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra for both the 2012-2013 and 2014-2015 seasons; he began a five-year residency with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in September 2010. The San Francisco Symphony gave a “Beethoven & Bates” festival during its 2013-2014 season and recorded his *Liquid Interface*, *The B-Sides* and *Alternative Energy* for release in 2015. Bates’ many honors include a Charles Ives Scholarship and Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Guggenheim Fellowship, Jacob Druckman Memorial Prize from the Aspen Music Festival, ASCAP and BMI awards, a Fellowship from the Tanglewood Music Center, Rome Prize, Berlin Prize and a two-year Composer Residency with Young Concert Artists. In 2012, he was awarded the Heinz Medal in Arts and Humanities.

Mason Bates wrote of *White Lies for Lomax*, composed for solo piano in 2007 and two years later arranged for the California Symphony, where he was then Composer-in-Residence, “It is still a surprise to discover how few classical musicians are familiar with Alan Lomax, the ethnomusicologist who ventured into the American South (and elsewhere) to record the soul of a land. Those scratchy recordings captured everyone from Muddy Waters to a whole slew of anonymous blues musicians.

“*White Lies for Lomax* dreams up wisps of distant blues fragments — more fiction than fact, since they are hardly honest recreations of the blues — and lets them slowly accumulate to an assertive climax. This short but dense homage (which began life as a solo piano work) ends with a Lomax field recording floating in from an off-stage radio, briefly crossing paths with the cloud-like remnants of the work’s opening. The seemingly recent phenomenon of sampling — grabbing a sound-bite from a song and incorporating it into something new — is in fact a high-tech version of the very old practice of allusion or parody, and the inclusion of a field recording of early blues musicians at the end is a nod to that tradition.”

MAURICE RAVEL

Born 7 March 1875 in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France; died 28 December 1937 in Paris

Concerto in G major for Piano and Orchestra

PREMIERE OF WORK: Paris, 14 January 1932; Lamoureux Orchestra; Maurice Ravel, conductor; Marguerite Long, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 14 January 1945; Syria Mosque; Vladimir Bakaleinikoff, conductor; Leonard Bernstein, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 22 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, E-flat clarinet, B-flat clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

Ravel's tour of the United States in 1928 was such a success that he began to plan for a second one as soon as he returned to France. With a view toward having a vehicle for himself as a pianist on the return visit, he started work on a concerto in 1929, perhaps encouraged by the good fortune that Stravinsky had enjoyed concertizing with his *Concerto for Piano and Winds* and *Piano Capriccio* earlier in the decade. However, many other projects pressed upon him, not the least of which was a commission from the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who had lost his right arm in the First World War, to compose a piano concerto for left hand alone, and the Concerto in G was not completed until 1931.

The sparkling first movement of the Concerto in G opens with a bright melody in the piccolo that may derive from an old folk dance of the Basque region of southern France, where Ravel was born. There are several themes in this exposition: the lively opening group is balanced by another set that is more nostalgic and bluesy in character. The development section is an elaboration of the lively opening themes, ending with a brief cadenza in octaves as a link to the recapitulation. The lively themes are passed over quickly, but the nostalgic melodies are treated at some length. The jaunty vivacity of the beginning returns for a dazzling coda.

When Ravel first showed the manuscript of the *Adagio* to Marguerite Long, the soloist at the premiere, she commented on the music's effortless grace. The composer sighed, and told her that he had struggled to write the movement "bar by bar," that it had cost him more anxiety than any of his other scores. The movement begins with a long-breathed melody for solo piano over a rocking accompaniment. The central section does not differ from the opening as much in melody as it does in texture — a gradual thickening occurs as the music proceeds. The texture then becomes again translucent, and the opening melody is heard on its return in the plaintive tones of the English horn.

The finale is a whirling showpiece for soloist and orchestra that evokes the energetic world of jazz. Trombone slides, muted trumpet interjections, shrieking exclamations from the woodwinds abound. The episodes of the form tumble continuously one after another on their way to the abrupt conclusion of the work.

RICHARD WAGNER

Born 22 May 1813 in Leipzig; died 13 February 1883 in Venice

"Good Friday Spell" from *Parsifal* (1877-1882)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Bayreuth, Germany, 26 July 1882; Orchestra of the Festspielhaus; Hermann Levi, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 17 November 1899; Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 12 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

In 1848, Wagner drafted the script for a drama titled "Jesus of Nazareth." He seems never to have intended this scenario to serve as the basis of an opera (Wagner was always his own librettist), but it did contain scenes that he later used in *Parsifal*, most significantly the *Good Friday Spell*. Eight years later, he sketched another stage work, *Die Sieger* ("The Victors") that reflected his interest in Buddhist thought and doctrine and also contributed to the final form of *Parsifal*, especially the idea of the "rebirth" of Kundry. It was not until after composing *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* and much of *Siegfried* that this loose assembly of sketches, plans and ideas for *Parsifal* finally crystallized. In April 1857, after a cold, rainy spring, sunlight flooded the garden at Wagner's villa near Zurich one morning and sent him into an

almost visionary state. He later wrote, "The garden was breaking into leaf, the birds were singing, and I could rejoice in the fruitful quiet I had so long thirsted for. Suddenly it came to me that this was Good Friday, and I remembered the great message it had once brought to me as I was reading Wolfram's *Parzival*.... Its essence now became clear to me in overwhelming significance, and on the basis of the Good Friday idea I quickly conceived an entire drama in three acts of which I made a brief and hasty sketch." However, *Tristan und Isolde* intervened (Wagner considered using Parsifal as a minor character in this opera, but abandoned the idea), and the next step in the creation of *Parsifal* was not taken until 1865, when Wagner presented a detailed outline of the libretto to his fanatical admirer, King Ludwig II of Bavaria.

It was yet another dozen years — after *Die Meistersinger*, after *Götterdämmerung* — before the libretto of *Parsifal* took on its final form in 1877. The Prelude was composed in September, and Acts One and Two followed the next year. The entire short score was finished by April 4, 1879. The extensive job of orchestration took many months, often slowed by the composer's failing health, and it was not completed until January 13, 1882 in Palermo, one of the Italian cities Wagner visited to escape the harsh German winters. The premiere took place in his *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth the following July. Though he decreed that *Parsifal* would be presented only in that one theater for at least thirty years, interest in the new work was high, and orchestral excerpts were performed in America within months of the premiere, a concert version was given in New York in 1886, and the Metropolitan Opera mounted a full production in 1903.

Parsifal, which Wagner called a "stage-consecration-festival play," is rich in philosophical allusion, mystical symbolism and historical reference. Its main characters are the pure, faithful knights of the temple of Monsalvat who guard the Holy Grail, the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper, and the Spear that pierced His side at the Crucifixion. Klingsor, a knight refused entry into the holy band, seeks revenge by creating a garden of fleshly delights at the foot of the mount to tempt the knights from their sacred duty, wherein Kundry, Klingsor's most voluptuous temptress, has seduced Amfortas, King of the Knights of the Grail. During their passions, Klingsor stole the Spear and wounded Amfortas with it. The wound remains unhealed and the sanctity of the order violated until the Spear can be recovered. The story of the opera revolves around Parsifal, a man without guile who, through his learning of compassion, renunciation of worldly passions, and purity of faith, regains the Spear and brings salvation to Amfortas and his knights.

The *Good Friday Spell* comes in the opera's final act. Parsifal, pure, faithful and strong, has vanquished Klingsor, returned the Spear, and saved the Knights of the Grail. It is Good Friday. Wagner, drawing from the Medieval legend that the earth, nourished by a sacred dew, put forth an unequalled loveliness in tribute to the Savior on that day, depicted this climactic scene as an ecstatic, glowing fulfillment of the opera's underlying philosophy. His music calls forth the transcendent radiance, matchless beauty and sacred enchantment of the holy day.

FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Born 3 February 1809 in Hamburg; died 4 November 1847 in Leipzig

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Opus 107, "Reformation" (1829-1830)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Berlin, November 15, 1832; Orchestra of the Berlin Singakademie; Felix Mendelssohn, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 21 January 1949; Syria Mosque; Charles Muench, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 33 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, serpent (replaced by tuba in modern performance), timpani and strings

In 1530, Melancthon, the scholar and humanist who was one of the seminal figures in German history, wrote the document that became the basic creed of the Lutheran faith. Known as the Augsburg Confession, it was endorsed by Luther and became one of the fundamental cornerstones of the Reformation. A celebration in Germany was planned for the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, and Mendelssohn was commissioned to write a work to commemorate the event. Mendelssohn's selection for the commission at first appears curious, since he was born into one of the most prominent Jewish families in northern Europe. However, while he was still a boy his father had him

baptized into the Christian faith because life for Jews in his birthplace, Hamburg, had become intolerable under the French occupation. Felix added the Christian surname Bartholdy to his ancestral one, and he insisted that he had abandoned the old religion. He eagerly took on the commission for the celebratory Symphony, both to make a public confirmation of his Christianity and also to show his admiration for Luther as a leader, a musician, and as the translator of the Bible into German.

Just as Mendelssohn was setting to work on the new Symphony in London in September 1829, he had an unfortunate carriage accident that left him bedridden for two months with a severe leg injury. Despite the kindness he was shown by his English hosts, he was unable to make any progress on the score until he arrived back home in Berlin. The recovery time was not wasted, however. Mendelssohn, like Mozart, largely finished his compositions in his head before he committed them to paper, so the job of writing them down was more mechanical than creative. Mendelssohn's usual method was to write out the bass line completely for a section and then go back to fill in the other parts above it. For this Symphony, however, he decided to stretch his faculties to the limit and write the entire work, measure-by-measure, directly into full score. His friend Eduard Devrient, the German theater historian, was astonished by the process: "This was a gigantic effort of memory, to fit in each detail, each doubling of parts, each solo effect bar-wise, like an immense mosaic. It was wonderful to watch the black column slowly advance upon the blank music paper. Felix said it was so great an effort that he would never do it again; he discontinued the process after the first movement of the Symphony. It has proved his power, however, mentally to elaborate a work in its minutest details." Such reports suggest that Mendelssohn may have been the most naturally gifted musician of the 19th century. The work was completed in April 1830.

The "Reformation" Symphony opens with a solemn introduction in D major whose harmonic suspensions recall the style of Renaissance polyphony. The "Dresden Amen" (a chord formula long associated with the Lutheran service at the Court Church in Dresden, where it was used as a response to the sermon to symbolize the hovering of the spirit of the Holy Ghost) is suspended high in the strings to close the introduction. The body of the movement (in D minor) commences with the quickening of the tempo and the announcement of the main theme, a bold melody begun with the rising leap of a fifth. A good deal of contrapuntal working-out ensues before the violins present the second theme, more lyrical in nature than the first but still unsettled in character. The agitated development section is joined to the recapitulation by another presentation of the "Dresden Amen." The movement's stormy countenance and minor tonality are maintained throughout. The second movement is a dance-like scherzo in buoyant triple meter; its central trio is a sweet melody for oboe duet. The introspective third movement is like a quiet prayer that serves as a preface to the finale. A richly harmonized presentation by the winds of Luther's great chorale *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* ("A Mighty Fortress is our God") begins the finale. The tempo quickens and fragments of the tune are woven with new thematic material. The movement is swept along to its closing pages, a powerful re-statement of *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* by the full orchestra.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda