



Program Notes for Symphonic Spectaculars!

Written by Peter Laki

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Contact (2022)

by Kevin Puts (b. St. Louis, 1972)

Kevin Puts's opera The Hours, starring the extraordinary trio of divas Renée Fleming, Kelli O'Hara and Joyce DiDonato, opened to great acclaim at the Met in November 2022, cementing the already stellar reputation of this Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer. Commissioned by a consortium of orchestras (San Francisco Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, Colorado Symphony, Spokane Symphony, Sun Valley Music Festival Orchestra, Florida Orchestra), Puts's new work Contact was premiered on March 26, 2022, by the Florida Orchestra led by Daniel Black, with the members of the Time of Three trio as soloists. Here is Mr. Puts explaining how the work came to be written:

In April, 2017 I first heard a live performance by the prodigiously gifted string trio Time for Three at Joe's Pub in New York City. The group—Nick Kendall and Charles Yang, violinists and Ranaan Meyer, bassist— had contacted me about the possibility of my writing them a concerto, and after hearing them play, sing, improvise and perform their own arrangements and compositions that evening I felt both elated—by the infectious energy and joy they exude as performers—and also rather daunted by the thought. It seemed our musical tastes were so similar that I suggested to them, not at all facetiously, “Maybe you ought to write your own concerto!” I simply couldn't imagine conceiving any music they couldn't improvise themselves.

One of the tunes the trio performed that night at Joe's Pub was an original, called “Vertigo”, which the guys later told me they wrote in a hotel room on the road. In the song, all three members both play their instruments and sing. I wondered about the possibility of beginning the concerto with the trio singing a wordless refrain, a cappella. I wrote a chord progression which unfolds from a single note and progresses through simple, suspended harmonies. Orchestral winds respond with the same music while the trio adds decorative, improvisatory gestures. This idea, first heard in a reflective manner, grows considerably until the orchestral brass deliver a most emphatic version of it. This first movement (“The Call”) ends with the same sense of questioning with which it began.

Threatening unisons, played by the entire orchestra, break the mood startlingly and impel the soloists who drive forward with syncopated rhythms and virtuoso flurries of arpeggios. The energy in this second movement (“Codes”) is unrelenting, often drawing its harmonic flavor from the ladder of notes which forms the overtone series and by combining triads from disparate keys.

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By yet another contrast, the orchestral music that opens the third movement (“Contact”) is cold and stark. I had the image of an abandoned vessel floating inert in the recesses of space. The soloists interrupt this with a quiet, gently rolling meditation, eventually inviting a solo oboe and a solo clarinet to join in lyrical counterpoint high above. Eventually, the soloists recall the stark opening of the movement, rendering its rhythms into an unaccompanied phrase of tenderness and longing.

To put it mildly, the search for a silver lining amid the Covid-19 pandemic has been a unique challenge. But the cancellation of the initial performances of *Contact* scheduled for the summer of 2020 allowed us to continue working together on the concerto long after I finished it. Though my original title was simply *Triple Concerto*, we all agreed there was something more than abstract musical expression going on, that there was a story being told. Could the refrain at the opening of the concerto be a message sent into space, a call to intelligent life across the vast distances containing clues to our DNA, to our very nature as Earth people? Could the Morse code-like rhythms of the scherzo suggest radio transmissions, wave signals, etc.? And might the third movement (originally called simply “Ballad”) represent the moment of contact itself? (Admittedly, the climax of the film adaptation of Carl Sagan’s *Contact*, at which point Ellie, played by the wonderful Jodie Foster, en route via a wormhole to an alien civilization, witnesses a radiant cosmic event to which she tearfully breathes, “No words...they should have sent a poet...no words...” was in my mind during these discussions.)

Still in search of a finale to the concerto, I was serendipitously introduced to the wonderful gankino horo (Ganka’s Dance), a traditional Bulgarian melody, blazingly performed by at least twelve young cellists in unison at my (then) ten-year-old son Ben’s studio cello recital. At home, I began playing it on the piano and gradually my own compositional voice crept in. I was reminded of Bartók’s haunting Romanian Folk Dances and the composer’s fusion of his own musical sensibilities with age-old folk melodies. And so I set about composing a sort of fantasy on this tune, its asymmetric rhythmic qualities a fitting counterbalance to the previous three movements.

The word contact has gained new resonance during these years of isolation. It is my hope that this concerto might be heard as an expression of yearning for this fundamental human need. I am deeply grateful to Time for Three for their belief in my work and for the tireless collaborative spirit which allowed us to develop this showcase for their immense talents.

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Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor* (1870–1887)

By Alexander Borodin (St. Petersburg, 1833 – St. Petersburg, 1887)

Russian composers of the 19th century believed that a genuine national school in music was unthinkable without opera—and not just any kind of opera, but opera on Russian historical subjects. Building on the example of Mikhail Glinka's landmark *Life for the Tsar*, the composers of the “Mighty Handful” considered the writing of historical operas as one of their most artistic tasks.

Alexander Borodin, one of the five members of that famous group, started working on *Prince Igor* in 1869. Based on the 12th-century *Lay of Igor's Campaign*, the opera was about Prince Igor's war against the Polovtsians (an Asian people related to the Turks). Borodin worked on the opera, on and off, for the rest of his life, but it was still unfinished at the time of his death. It had been difficult for Borodin to find the time to compose, since he had a dual career in music and science, being a professor of chemistry at the Medico-Surgical Academy in St. Petersburg. A performing version of the opera was later made by his colleagues Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov.

In *Prince Igor*, Borodin interwove the political and military subject matter with a love interest between Igor's son Vladimir and Konchakovna, the daughter of the Polovtsian leader, Khan Konchak. Konchak is not an absolute villain; rather, he is a ruthless but honest warrior who is capable of treating his enemies with honor and dignity. After capturing Igor, the Khan orders his people to entertain his noble prisoner with song and dance; it is then that the *Polovtsian Dances*, the best-known excerpt from the opera, are performed.

The sequence opens with the seductive dance of a group of young Polovtsian women, followed by the dance of the fierce warriors and, finally, by a grand finale where everyone celebrates and rejoices together. Borodin managed to create an exotic atmosphere without using any actual folklore materials (to which he had no first-hand access). A few isolated Oriental melodic fragments, placed in new contexts, were enough for him to create a convincing illusion of a pagan culture that, in the opera, was consistently opposed to Russian Christianity.

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Suite No. 2 from *L'Arlésienne* ("The Girl from Arles," 1872)

by Georges Bizet (Paris, 1838 – Paris, 1875)

arranged and orchestrated (1879) by Ernest Guiraud (New Orleans, 1837 – Paris, 1892)

Alphonse Daudet's play *L'Arlésienne* (originally a short story), which opened in Paris on October 1, 1872 with incidental music by Georges Bizet, could be best described as a "folk tragedy." During a time, when French cultural and artistic life was almost completely centered on the capital, Daudet gave voice to the Southern part of the country. Arles, where the title character of the play comes from, is just 20 miles from Daudet's own birthplace of Nîmes. In the play, a young man in the countryside discovers that his fiancée is another man's lover and takes his own life in despair.

Bizet's musical contributions to the play tend to provide the Southern *couleur locale*, rather than attempt to illustrate the tragic plot. While the drama is largely forgotten today, the music is still popular in the form of the two suites, each in four movements, that were drawn from it. Bizet himself compiled the first suite the year of the premiere; a second suite was assembled, after the composer's untimely death, by his friend, composer Ernest Guiraud.

The second suite opens with a lyrical *Pastorale*, an evocation of the peaceful countryside, followed by a dreamy *Intermezzo*. The third-movement Minuet, in an archaic style, is actually not from the incidental music for *L'Arlésienne* but from another Bizet work starring a beautiful young woman, the opera *La jolie fille de Perth* ("The Fair Maid of Perth"). The last movement is a farandole dance, based on the same famous melody as the opening Prelude of the first suite. It is an old Provençal Christmas carol known as the "March of Turenne."

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La Valse (1920)

by Maurice Ravel (Ciboure, France, 1875 – Paris, 1937)

Dance was always an important source of inspiration for Ravel. Works as different as *Pavane for a Dead Princess*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* and of course, *Boléro*, all incorporate dance rhythms of one sort or another.

Ravel was particularly fascinated by the waltz. In 1906, he started planning a large waltz-fantasy he wanted to call *Wien* ("Vienna"). As he wrote to his friend Jean Marnold in February 1906,

What I'm undertaking at the moment is not subtle: a grand waltz, a sort of homage to the memory of the great Strauss -- not Richard, the other one, Johann. You know of my deep sympathy for these wonderful rhythms, and that I value the *joie de vivre* expressed by the dance far more deeply than the Franckist puritanism.

Some years later, in 1911, he composed *Valses nobles et sentimentales* for piano (orchestrating it the next year). In this work, he paid homage to an earlier waltz style, as found in the dances of Schubert. *Wien* remained unfinished for a long time. During World War I, Ravel, an ardent French patriot voluntarily involved in military duties, could not bring himself to work on a composition named for an enemy capital. By the time he returned to it after the war's end, the piece had become very different from the original concept. The Habsburg Empire, whose old-world glamour Johann Strauss Jr.'s great waltzes had symbolized, had collapsed. In the words of the late Klaus G. Roy, longtime program annotator of The Cleveland Orchestra, "World War I left nothing undisturbed; life had changed forever. After those frightful years, the *joie de vivre* had become tinged with more than a trace of bitterness — and pain had been added to nostalgia."

La Valse — as the piece was now called — is more than a dance; it is dance, but at the same time it is also a reflection about dance, the representation of the birth of the dance, its life, and, ultimately, its destruction. Ravel wanted *La Valse* to be staged as a ballet by the Ballets Russes, but the company's director, Serge Diaghilev, whose musical instincts were uncanny, refused to produce it as he felt the work to be "not a ballet but the portrait of the ballet."

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Ravel had the following paragraph printed in the score:

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Like the great Strauss waltzes (*On the Beautiful Blue Danube*, for example), *La Valse* is really a whole set of waltzes, with a number of melodies following one another in close succession. The work starts almost imperceptibly: the distant drone of the muted double basses can barely be heard. We might say there is a gradual transition from silence to music. Only instruments with a low range play at first, and the pitch increases gradually. As the melodic fragments coalesce into full-fledged melodies, the strings are often instructed to change left-hand positions with audible shifts, an effect that contributes a great deal to the Viennese ambiance. Subsequent waltz strains feature delicate woodwind solos (oboe, flute) as the harmonic language becomes more and more dissonant and adventuresome. The third waltz begins on a strong downbeat reinforced by timpani and bass drum and features the brass section in a prominent role. The next waltz, full of longing, is scored for violins and woodwind.

The sky begins to darken as the next section starts with a strong *fortissimo* and some of the harshest dissonances heard so far. However, the clouds can be dispelled for now, as the clarinets and cellos get their chance at a sweet, lilting melody. But the dissonant ninth intervals won't go away; on the contrary, they receive more emphasis when played by the whole orchestra *fortissimo*. The subsequent duo of two solo violas is pervaded by painful feelings, and the graceful woodwind melody that follows it (the last new tune in the piece) is perturbed by violent trills in the horns that clearly spell doom.

At this point — about halfway through the piece — a recapitulation starts with the somber murmurs of the opening. Several of the earlier waltz themes return, though their order of sequence is different from the first time, and the orchestration is entirely new. The gentle violin tune, described above as “full of longing,” is now blasted forth by horns and trombones amidst a great commotion in which the entire orchestra participates. What was a delicate viola duo now becomes a major dramatic outburst that leads directly to the final climax, in which the tender waltz melodies are whipped up to a state of veritable hysteria. The tempo accelerates to the end, and the dissonances become ever harsher. Finally, the next to the last measure contains four quarter notes instead of three — that's how far we have gotten from the original idea of the waltz. As Klaus Roy wrote, “The final two measures....are surely meant to symbolize the destruction of the past represented by the waltz....Three-quarter time....had become a casualty, too.”