

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

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Holy Roller

Missy Mazzoli

born in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, in 1980

premiere: Albany, New York, May 19, 2012

instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; percussion, harp, piano; strings

duration: 10 minutes

Missy Mazzoli is only in her thirties but is already enjoying a reputation as one of the most intriguing composers of our time. Her work defies easy categorization: it certainly draws on the Zeitgeist, forging alliances between traditional classical music and indie-rock, jazz, and fusions of all sorts. One critic has described her as “one of the new wave of scarily smart young composers.” Another sees her as “Brooklyn’s post-millennial Mozart.” This gives you an idea of her eclectic range, as she has composed works for such varied artists as Emanuel Ax, Meredith Monk, the Kronos Quartet, eighth blackbird, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Victoire, a group she founded to perform her music. Her first opera, *Song From the Uproar*, was staged by LA Opera in 2015 and her second, the critically acclaimed *Breaking the Waves*, was debuted last year by Opera Philadelphia.

Mazzoli was born in Pennsylvania but lives in Brooklyn. She studied music at Yale, the Hague Royal Conservatory, and Boston University. Among her teachers are Louis Andriessen, Aaron Jay Kernis, and John Harbison. She has taught at New York University and currently holds a position in composition at the Mannes College of Music in New York.

Holy Roller was commissioned and first performed by the Albany Symphony in 2012. Mazzoli has written that the piece is “devotional music for a non-existent religion” with roots in the 16th century English composer Thomas Tallis’s psalm settings. But, she adds, “the original material has been transformed, stretched, turned inside-out, and all but obliterated by the orchestra.”

In addition, she tells us, the music was inspired by two so-called “outsider artists”: Ferdinand Cheval, a French postman who spent 33 years building his Le Palais Ideal out of rocks he gathered on his postal route; and Simon Rodia, an Italian construction worker who, also over 33 years, built the “now iconic Watts Tower in Los Angeles out of steel pipes decorated with found objects.” She continues, “These artworks have always seemed to me to be monuments to a personal or even non-existent religion, private expressions of obsession and devotion. In a way this music is my “outsider architecture”—a cathedral of found musical objects, a sonic temple of bottle caps and broken glass.”

This is the first performance of Holy Roller by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.

Concerto No. 23 for Piano & Orchestra in A Major, K. 488

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

born in Salzburg, Austria, in 1756;

died in Vienna in 1791

premiere: Vienna, March 2, 1786

instrumentation: solo piano; flute, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons; 2 horns; strings

duration: 27 minutes

Mozart was a virtuoso on the piano and always considered it to be his “master instrument.” He composed 27 concertos for it, 21 of them for solo piano and orchestra. The critic Alfred Einstein considered them to be “the crowning and the apex of his instrumental achievements;” they are “the synthesis of complexity and clarity,” as conductor Bruno Walter wrote. Mozart agreed. Writing to his father about an earlier trio of concertos from 1782, they are “a happy medium between what is too easy and too difficult; they are very brilliant, pleasing to the ear, and natural...” Concerto No. 23 in A Major is one of three companion concertos written in the winter of 1786. The A Major was finished on March 2 during the traditional Lenten concert season in Vienna. Its premiere followed upon that of Mozart’s one-act opera, *The Impresario*, and occurred during the preparation for *The Marriage of Figaro* which opened in May. So, a remarkably productive period even for this most fluent of composers.

The 1786 concertos were composed, however, at a time when Mozart seemed to be losing his audience. Some felt that his music was growing too complex, too difficult to grasp, and they were abandoning his subscription concerts. Possibly for this reason these concertos, especially K. 488, seem simpler to the ear, the key of A Major being a tranquil, ingratiating key to Mozart. He also abandons the penetrating oboes in his orchestration for the warmer tones of clarinets.

Critic Michael Steinberg suggests that to Mozart the concerto is a “conversation,” not among equals surely but a conversation, not a declamation by the solo piano with mere echoing accompaniment. He further writes that Mozart’s music is rooted in the theatre and in the human voice. So it is interesting to ask of the soloist, “When will he enter, and how? Listen to the ways in which he first introduces the soloist.” In the case of K. 488, the “conversation” begins in the orchestra as it introduces not one but three subjects. Only then does the solo piano enter, without fanfare, to repeat the first theme, then again with embellishments. Throughout the first movement the piano seems to follow the orchestra’s thematic lead. After the exposition a moment of exquisite silence precedes the second main theme of great beauty. This is developed and in the recapitulation the theme is presented afresh by the piano and continued by the woodwinds with the piano playing in counterpoint. The brief cadenza is unpretentious as befits the gentle simplicity of this opening movement.

The slow movement, marked *adagio*, is, by contrast to the opening A Major, in the rather bleak key of F-sharp Minor, a key that Mozart uses in no other concerto. It is a rather haunting aria-like movement, first as a solo in the piano, then continued by a languid orchestra with particularly charming passages for woodwinds and then strings playing *pizzicato*.

The allegro assai finale picks up the pace, a rondo that returns us to the feel of the opening A Major movement, bringing, to paraphrase Alfred Einstein, a breath of fresh air into a darkened room.

The K. 488 Concerto, though composed for Mozart himself as the soloist, was not published during his lifetime.

Manfred Blum conducted a 1962 performance of this concerto, with Ilana Vered as soloist. In 1989 Thomas Elefant led the RSO in the first movement only, with Young Artist Competition winner Wen Chin Yao at the piano.

Petrushka (1947 revision)

Igor Stravinsky

born in Oranienbaum, Russia, in 1882;

died in New York City, in 1971

premiere: Paris, June 13, 1911

instrumentation: piccolo, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon; 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; timpani, celesta, harp, piano, percussion; strings

duration: 36 minutes

Three great ballets established Stravinsky as a giant of twentieth century music: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913). His earlier compositions while still in St. Petersburg, promising though they were, had largely clung to the styles of the German tradition and Russian nationalism. Even *Firebird*, though innovative in a number of ways, reflected the nineteenth-century influence of Stravinsky's mentor, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. But with *Petrushka* the composer found his true voice as, in Osbert Sitwell's words, "a composer of genius grown to his full stature."

Firebird had served as Stravinsky's calling card to western musical circles. It had been commissioned by Serge Diaghilev, the impresario of the Ballet Russes, to open his Paris season in 1910. *Firebird's* great success not only propelled Stravinsky to the front ranks of the new music in Paris; it demonstrated his great flair in composing for the ballet theatre. He and Diaghilev had begun a long and fruitful relationship.

The idea for *Petrushka* had already germinated before the ink had dried on *Firebird*. It began as a concert piece for piano and orchestra in which, as Stravinsky later told it, the piano would behave much like a puppet "suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. The orchestra in turn retaliates... and it all ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet." The idea for the title struck him with sudden illumination: "Petrushka," the luckless but immortal puppet who is to the Russians as "Punch" or "Pierrot" is to the English or the French.

Diaghilev saw immediately the dramatic possibilities of all this and persuaded Stravinsky to turn it into another ballet. The impresario assigned his best scenic designer, Alexander Benois, and his most gifted

choreographer, Michel Fokine, to collaborate. The score was composed mostly in Switzerland and on the Riviera over the autumn and winter of 1910–11. The premiere received wide acclaim in Paris on June 13, 1911. In his memoirs Stravinsky credits its great success to the “spectacular, unsurpassed” artistry of the great Nijinsky who danced the title role, and to conductor Pierre Monteux who “provided a clear and finished execution of the score.” (Monteux was to conduct the stormy opening night of *The Rite of Spring* two years later).

Petrushka is billed as a “burlesque in four scenes” with a sad ending; thus it has comedy, joy, drama, and pathos. Stravinsky laces his original music with snatches of Russian folk tunes, even an Austrian waltz and a French music hall ditty. Yet there are none of the lush orchestral sonorities found in *Firebird*. Here the orchestra is strictly functional, subordinated to the melodic and dramatic ideas. In their service Stravinsky creates many wonderful effects, among them the *ostinato* “accordion” sounds produced by alternating fifths and thirds; the puppet’s own motive, dissonant and bitonal with its now famous “Petrushka chord” of superimposed triads (C Major over F-Sharp Major), and the distinctive rhythmic virtuosity that was to be fully exploited later in *The Rite of Spring*.

A brief synopsis follows:

Scene 1: The Shrovetide fair in St. Petersburg in the 1830s. Jostling crowds, booths of trinkets and sweets, and a little puppet theatre. Organ grinders and their dancers compete for customers by playing simultaneously. Two drummers announce the Showman, who draws aside the curtain of his theatre to reveal three lifeless puppets: the pathetic Petrushka, the beautiful Ballerina, and the menacing Moor, who is the rival for her affections. The “Petrushka” motive is heard first in the clarinets, later and often in the trumpets. The Showman miraculously charms the puppets to life with his beguiling flute, and they perform a Russian dance for the astonished crowd. The jealous Petrushka, however, attacks his rival and the Showman orders them all back into their cells.

Scene 2: Petrushka’s cell. He miserably reflects on his ugliness, hating his cruel master and yearning for the love of the beautiful Ballerina. She visits him but soon leaves, repelled by his grotesqueness. The piano demonstrates his rage in those “cascading arpeggios.”

Scene 3: The Moor’s cell. He lolls self-assuredly on a divan. Exotic oriental music is heard from the woodwinds, especially the sinister English horn. The Ballerina dances in to a spritely trumpet tune, then the two

awkwardly waltz together. Their lovemaking is interrupted by the fiercely jealous Petrushka, who is unceremoniously thrown out.

Scene 4: The longest of the segments, at the fair in the evening. The festivities are at their height. A group of nursemaids dance by. Soon a peasant piper appears, leading a lumbering dancing bear, deliciously portrayed by the tuba and squealing clarinets. A drunken merchant with two gypsy girls in tow scatters money to the crowd. Coachmen and grooms do a clog dance, joined by the nursemaids. A band of masqueraders rushes in for some buffoonery. Suddenly a commotion breaks out in the puppet theatre. It is a fight to the death as the Moor chases Petrushka and strikes him down with his sword. In brief spasms of agony, Petrushka dies amid the crowd. The Showman emerges to drag away the torn remains of what is, after all, only a puppet of straw and wood. But as the crowd disperses, the Showman is startled to notice Petrushka's ghost (a piccolo trumpet) prancing on the roof of the theatre, jeering and mocking the crowd. The Showman flees into the night as the music comes to its quiet, enigmatic end.

The Richmond Symphony Orchestra has performed Petrushka once before, in 1990, with Thomas Elefant on the podium.

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