

PROGRAM NOTES on fire

WILLIAM INTRILIGATOR, Music Director & Conductor



Ludwig van Beethoven

b. 1770, Bonn, Germany;
d. 1827, Vienna, Austria

Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus*

Beethoven's first ballet score, *The Creatures of Prometheus*, set to a scenario inspired by the Enlightenment ideals he cherished. Labeled as a "mythological-allegorical" ballet, the ballet's allegory was described thus: "It portrays an exalted spirit, who found the people of his time in a state of ignorance and refined them through knowledge and art and brought them enlightenment." With choreography by the Neapolitan ballet master Salvatore Viganò, the ballet premiered at Vienna's Burgtheater on March 28, 1801.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus is the semi-divine son of the Titans who brought fire to humankind and was cruelly punished by the gods for this. The ballet, however, presents a different, more positive story in which he creates two beings, male and female, and then brings them to Parnassus to be educated in the arts and sciences by Apollo's muses.

Beethoven wrote an overture and 17 other numbers for *Prometheus*. Its Overture opens dramatically with a loud, dissonant chord definitely *not* in the home key of C Major. Then a slow introduction unfurls a noble theme, led by the oboes, that corresponds to Prometheus' higher nature. Shifting to a faster tempo, the main body of the piece is a whirling, rhythmically vivacious sonata form, full of zesty syncopations and some heroic gestures, especially in its closing measures.

Overture to *Music for the Royal Fireworks*

By 1749, when he wrote his *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, George Frideric Handel was 64 and the acknowledged monarch of British music. This score of unparalleled instrumental splendor was created for a spectacular fireworks display in London to celebrate the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, ending nearly a decade of war between Great Britain and Austria on one side and France, Spain, and various German principalities on the other. For months, an elaborate Palladian edifice was constructed in the city's Green Park as a backdrop for the fireworks. King George II insisted that Handel's music (which was to be performed *before not during* the fireworks) be written only for "warlike instruments" — that is, trumpets, horns, and drums. Handel, however, was stubborn enough to override his majesty's wishes and include strings as well. For the work's first performance on April 27, 1749, the orchestra consisted of 24 oboes, 12 bassoons, nine horns, nine trumpets, three sets of timpani, and strings!

Its most glorious movement is its Overture in the ceremonial French style: an opening slow section with stately rhythms, followed by a faster section. Usually, the fast section would be highly contrapuntal, even fugal in character. However, knowing that the interplay of so many separate voices would produce a muddle in an outdoor situation, Handel instead stressed splendid antiphonal effects between the different instrumental groups.



George Frideric Handel

b. 1685, Halle, Saxony;
d. 1759, London, England



Zane Merritt

b. 1985, Dubuque, IA;
now living in Buffalo, NY

Neural Firings (and Misfirings) Guitar Concerto

Based in Buffalo, New York, Zane Merritt defines the spirit of experimental eclecticism in contemporary music. A guitarist and composer, he draws on both classical traditions and popular, rock, and jazz influences. His performances at Monk's in Dubuque have demonstrated his flair as an improviser on the guitar, while he has also composed in a more classical style for the University of Dubuque Wind Ensemble.

Tonight we'll hear the world premiere of Merritt's new guitar concerto *Neural Firings (and Misfirings)*, for which he has provided the following commentary:

"*Neural Firings (and Misfirings)* was inspired largely by the insights into anxiety and depression provided in *Lost Connections* by Johann Hart, a book that aggregates numerous academic studies showing depression and anxiety to be largely caused by societal factors as opposed to biological ones. In this way, depression and anxiety can be viewed as reactions to unmet psychological and emotional needs instead of the results of a broken brain. This is why I chose the 'misfirings' aspect of the title.

"The guitar's role weaves in and out of phase with the orchestra, always alienated to some degree in terms of rhythm and behavior. The nature of the instrument helps this process along: its attack-oriented style is at odds with the majority of the orchestral instruments. Additionally, the guitar's 'in-between' state as an instrument of considerable expressive potential (but not a true singing instrument able to sustain a phrase) and also considerable contrapuntal potential (but not as much as a keyboard instrument) makes it both challenging and rewarding to put into an orchestral context. I tried to explore that dual nature of the instrument with novel results.

"As I hear it, the character of the piece is ultimately one of lament. The soloist struggles through the more frenetic sections leading to a resignation in the more melodic ones. The piece's motives struggle between upward and downward motion. Much as we currently know about mental illness and its treatment, the piece travels a distance, it learns and exerts effort, but leaves much traveling, learning, and exertion ahead."

Conga del Fuego Nuevo

One of Latin America's most popular composers and the first musician ever to win the Gold Medal of Fine Arts of Mexico, Arturo Márquez is best known in America for his nine Cuban-flavored *danzóns* and especially *Danzón No. 2*, which has been frequently performed by Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra. The son of a mariachi musician, Márquez began as a mariachi violinist himself. Extensive compositional training, aided by a Fulbright scholarship, took him to Mexico City, France, and the United States. In recent years, he has been increasingly drawn to working with traditional Mexican folk and popular styles, as well as music with Caribbean origins.



Arturo Márquez

b. 1950, Alamos, Sonora, Mexico;
now living in Mexico City

Another exciting Márquez piece popularized by Dudamel is the *Conga del Fuego Nuevo* (Conga of the New Fire) composed in 2005. Like the *danzón*, the *conga* hails from Cuba and refers to the music of special street ensembles that perform during the carnivals in Havana and Santiago de Cuba. Of African origin, it developed from the slaves that were imported to Cuba from the Congo in central Africa. Making use of tall cylindrical drums known as conga drums, it also refers to a quick dance using short sliding steps. The sound of those drums fill this infectious, highly rhythmic piece and come into particular prominence during its quieter, slower middle section.



Manuel de Falla

b. 1876, Cádiz, Spain;
d. 1946, Alta Gracia, Argentina

“Ritual Fire Dance” from *El amor brujo*

In his ballet *El amor brujo* (“Love the Magician”), Manuel de Falla focused on the dark core of Spanish-gypsy music and folklore. When de Falla came to Paris to study music in 1907, he became a friend of Maurice Ravel and a member of that Frenchman’s circle of progressive artists known as “Les Apaches.” But the beginning of World War I sent him back to his native Spain determined to write music that would exploit the concert potential of flamenco dance and the passionate Andalusian song style known as *cante jondo* (“profound song”).

In the autumn of 1914, the celebrated gypsy flamenco artist Pastora Imperio asked de Falla to write her a song and dance. The composer and his colleague, the poet Gregorio Martínez Sierra, were so fascinated by the tales Imperio and her mother told them that instead they created a whole ballet with song sequences, based on the lives of the gypsies living in the mountain caves near Granada. Completed in April 1915, *El amor brujo* tells of a beautiful gypsy, Candélas, who is haunted by the jealous ghost of her dead lover. Whenever she embraces her new lover, Carmélo, the ghost intervenes. Determined to exorcise the ghost, Candélas performs an incantatory dance (the nocturnal “Ritual Fire Dance”) and then asks a pretty gypsy girl to lure the spirit away. The spell is finally broken, and Candélas and Carmélo are united.

Though the ballet was not a success at its premiere in Madrid, de Falla decided to revise it extensively for larger orchestra, creating in the process a concert version that triumphed in post-war Paris. And the propulsive “Ritual Fire Dance” became a runaway hit both with orchestras and as a piano encore piece.

“Volcano” from Symphony No. 50, “Mount St. Helens”

During a long and prolific life, Alan Hovhaness rejected all the musical -isms of the 20th century and drew his inspiration from Eastern music, especially that of Armenia, his ancestral home. A lifelong mystic, he began studying traditional Armenian music, both religious and secular, with Armenian priests and Eastern troubadours. His unique musical voice soon developed, based on ancient modes and, later, on Indian ragas. In 1965, he summed up his musical philosophy: “I am more interested in creating fresh, spontaneous, singing melodic lines than in the factory-made tonal patterns of industrial civilization.”

Having found his inspiration, Hovhaness created an enormous number of works at breathless speed, leaving behind more than 60 symphonies. His method was to compose through the night, becoming more and more creative as dawn approached. His haunting music with its often deeply spiritual content drew a cult following.

In 1981, his former publishing house C.F. Peters commissioned a programmatic symphony, which became his No. 50, about the catastrophic eruption of the Washington State volcano Mt. St. Helens, which had happened just a year earlier. Both the Seattle Symphony and the San José (CA) Symphony wanted to premiere it, but the latter won a coin toss to introduce it on March 2, 1984.

Living in Seattle in 1980, Hovhaness remembered the event very vividly. “When Mount St. Helens erupted on the morning of May 18, 1980, the sonic boom struck our south windows.



Alan Hovhaness

b. 1911, Somerville, Massachusetts;
d. 2000, Seattle, Washington

... Ashes continued to travel all around the world, landing lightly on our house a week later, after their journey around the planet. ... I have tried to suggest a musical tribute to the sublime grandeur and beauty of Mount St. Helens and the surrounding majestic Cascade Mountains."

We will hear "Volcano," the Symphony's third and final movement, which stunningly portrays the violence of the eruption. It begins with a calm, majestic chorale representing the mountain at peace. A sudden crash of timpani and tam-tam (gong) shatters the morning. Then Hovhaness makes thrilling use of the drum battery to portray the power of the eruption, conveying a sense of a timeless ritual being re-enacted by the earth. The mountain's chorale theme returns, then leads to a rapid fugue using a sped-up version of the theme, and finally climaxes in a grand hymn that stretches the theme into a mighty augmentation in the full orchestra.



Igor Stravinsky

b. 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia;
d. 1971, New York City

The Firebird Suite (1919)

Igor Stravinsky's score for the fairy-tale ballet *The Firebird*, particularly in its suite adaptation, is far and away his most popular work. In fact, it became almost impossible to believe that this fearless modernist had actually once written such a lush and sensual score: a grand summation of the 19th-century Russian fascination with fantastic plots and opulent instrumental colors.

The Firebird's music needed to be lush for it was written for Serge Diaghilev's spectacular Ballets Russes, which was dazzling Paris during the seasons immediately preceding World War I. Diaghilev had a genius for assembling the greatest Russian dancers as well as scenic designers, poets, and composers from Russia and France to create ballet extravaganzas that looked as colorful as they sounded. In 1909, Diaghilev had the happy inspiration to try the 27-year-old Stravinsky, who had hitherto worked for him only as an orchestrator. *The Firebird* was Stravinsky's first major commission. "Take a good look at him," Diaghilev told his leading ballerina during rehearsals. He is a man on the eve of celebrity." And indeed, when *The Firebird* premiered at the Paris Opéra on June 25, 1910 to tumultuous applause, Stravinsky immediately became one of the hottest composers of the day.

The Firebird is a beloved creature in Russian folklore, and she corresponds to the Phoenix in classical mythology as a symbol of rebirth. The Russian folklorist Afasyev describes her: "The feathers of the Firebird are effulgent with silver and gold ... her eyes shine like crystal, and she sits in a golden cage. At darkest midnight, she flies into the garden and lights it as brightly as if with a thousand burning bonfires. Just one of her tail feathers holds such magical power that it is worth more than a kingdom." The scenario of the ballet combines the Firebird with the legends of the evil ogre Kashchei the Deathless One, and the captive princesses (familiar as the Grimm Brothers' tale *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*).

We will hear the 20-minute suite Stravinsky drew from his 45-minute ballet score, which serves as a kind of promotional trailer for this gorgeous work. In the murky and mysterious **Introduction**, Stravinsky conjures the dangerous realm of Kashchei's castle with ominous scales in muted low strings and menacing trombone snarls. Soon we hear the eerie sound of the Firebird's wings: an otherworldly effect created by the strings playing natural harmonics. Prince Ivan climbs over the castle wall to try to capture her. He briefly succeeds in **The Firebird's Dance** and **Variations**: here is some of Stravinsky's most ingenious music, glinting

with darting rhythms and prismatic, lighter-than-air colors from high woodwinds. The Firebird escapes, but leaves the Prince with one of her magical feathers.

More earthbound is the **Round Dance of the Princesses**, who like Ivan are ordinary mortals and captives of Kashchei. They dance a traditional Russian *khoro* or female round dance, and the Prince falls in love with the most beautiful of them. Next comes the stunning **"Infernal Dance of King Kashchei."** Stravinsky's rhythmic vitality is on display in this brutal dance built from syncopations.

In the nick of time, Prince Ivan remembers the magic tail feather and summons the Firebird. She forces Kashchei and his minions to dance until they drop in exhaustion. Lulling them to sleep with the rocking **"Berceuse"** or lullaby led by solo bassoon, the Firebird tells the Prince that Kashchei's soul lives in a buried egg; if he can crush that, he will kill the ogre and break the spell that binds the princesses. The Prince accomplishes this and in the majestic **Finale** weds his Princess. Introduced by solo horn, its melody is another authentic Russian folksong. This melody spreads through the orchestra, and the ballet ends in a blaze of bell-tolling Russian splendor.

Notes by Janet E. Bedell copyright 2019