

Teatro La Fenice

Friday 3 September 2021, 8.00 pm

Venice for change

Concert for Save the Planet

Richard Wagner

The Flying Dutchman: overture

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy

The Hebrides: overture

Jacques Offenbach

The Tales of Hoffmann: Barcarolle

Giuseppe Verdi

La traviata: Prelude

Bedřich Smetana

Vltava (The Moldau)

Má Vlast (My Fatherland), Cycle of Symphonic Poems

conductor **Michele Gamba**

Teatro La Fenice Orchestra



Nature and climate change are the themes underlying and inspiring this extraordinary concert wanted and organized by Sky in collaboration with the Teatro La Fenice.

The increasingly dreadful state of the planet's climate and the return to 'normal' life and music after a long period of isolation make this event a necessary and precious opportunity. A theatre symbol of rebirth like La Fenice - 25 years after the 1996 fire - and a unique, fragile and beautiful city like Venice, are the perfect setting for the event. Music, more than all other arts, knows how to speak to the human soul. In this special concert, music will become a unique and powerful instrument for raising awareness, to foster a new harmony between us and the Earth, as if we were all part of a big single score. The wish for a new beginning for Venice and for the whole world.

NOTES

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE NATURE AND MUSIC OF EUROPE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The first bars of the opening piece this evening, the overture from *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman), probably represent the most impressive *incipit* in the history of opera. With highly explosive dramatic sound effects, Richard Wagner portrays a violent storm at sea that demonstrates the true potential of the terrifying, uncontrollable strength of nature. Composed straight after *Rienzi*, and also known by its French-Italian title *Il vascello fantasma*, the opera debuted in Dresden in 1843 and had its Italian première in 1877 in Bologna. Wagner drew inspiration from a tale by Heinrich Heine for the Nordic legend of the flying Dutchman who was forced to sail the seas in eternity in search of a woman who would liberate him with her faithfulness. With a tumultuous supernatural dimension, this is a typical romantic drama in which the nocturnal marine setting is a decisive touch.

The overture is based on the reworking of the two main themes: the overwhelming martial theme of the Dutchman, and the theme of redemption through love (Senta's theme), adapted from the ballade that the protagonist sings in the second act. It also includes minor themes, such as that of the Norwegian seamen's chorus in the third act. Reflecting the content of the drama and ending with a revival of the Dutchman's motif to symbolise redemption and the victory of the lovers who are reunited in death, the piece thus presents an array of reminiscence-themes that characterise the relative characters or situations in the plot each time they appear. The various psychological elements of the opera are, however, held together by another 'figure' that was characteristic of nineteenth- and twentieth-century opera: the sea. It is portrayed as a space that is vital, at times agitated and at others calm, and as a metaphor of life and death, violence, and peace, upon which the mythical dimensions of the protagonist may be projected. It is almost an anticipation of Britten's *Peter Grimes*.

This aesthetic experience, which is articulated as a tendency to let oneself be mystically enveloped by the ineluctable whirlpool of nature and its inexplicable rhythm, actually began with Wagner in the history of music, and in western art more in general. Wagner's 'infinite melody' then went on to fuel an element of European artistic sensitivity that was interested in sensual immersion in the natural world, and in the epidermic contact with an undefinable atmosphere that was psychic rather than natural. This sensitivity became very widespread in the figurative arts, for example with Fantin-Latour, the author of a series of lithographs and paintings that were inspired by Wagner's themes, and Whistler, a music painter *par excellence*.

The decidedly romantic nature that characterises maritime landscapes in music is also to be found in overture op. 26 *The Hebrides* by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, which was particularly close to Wagner's heart and who would probably never have composed the *Flying Dutchman* if he had not heard it. The description of the captions and its nineteenth century naturalism are evident in the musical translation of the echoes of the waves breaking against the sea caves; this was a vision that had struck the twenty-year old composer when he travelled to Scotland in the summer of 1829, when he had the opportunity to visit Fingal's cave, formed of volcanic rock, on Staffa island in the Hebrides.

Completed in 1930 in Venice with the title *Die einsame Insel* (*The Solitary Island*) and revised two years later in Paris with its definitive name, the overture evokes a dreamlike landscape that is full of luminous reflections and an atmosphere that is pregnant with mystery and fascination. Written in the form of a sonata, with an introduction that presents the two main themes, one that develops in breadth, then a revival and a concluding coda, op. 26 is a symphonic score that is of admiral formal perfection and is emblematic of Mendelssohn's early works. Consisting of an ornate, descending arpeggio, the first theme oscillates between major and minor keys, and is repeated and accelerated deliberately with meteorological conditions in mind to reproduce the instability of the wave movement, and the alternation of light and shadows on the sea surface. Equally admirable is the orchestral colour in the second theme, which is initially presented as a combination of violin cellos and bassoons, with the odd parts played by the clarinets. All of this is filtered by the composer's imagination, and he does not limit himself to merely describing a situation, but instead wants to give life to a feeling or sensation. It is certainly no coincidence that the atmosphere of this piece was not only inspired by the beauty of the landscape on the composer's travels to the Hebrides, but also by the famous lines of the *epic poem cycle by Ossian*, which was an inevitable source of inspiration for all romantics.

From the sea of the Hebrides, we then come to the lagoon of Venice. The *Barcarolle* of the *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (The Tales of Hoffmann) by Jacques Offenbach (a fantasy opera that debuted posthumously at the Paris Opéra-Comique in 1881), is based on a specific genre, which was the songs sung by Venetian gondoliers, or a *barcarole*, and therefore closely related to the history of Venice. The *barcarolle* began to develop in the middle of the eighteenth century, also as regards instruments and opera, and then went on to become a European genre that was similar to the romance, mostly in 6/8, and mainly in minor keys and a uniform bass that was often persistent and 'undulated'. Popular above all with the romantics, the barcarolle played its part in the diffusion of the popular imagination of Venice throughout Europe, although examples both before and after exist. Offenbach adopts it at the beginning of the act of *Contes* that is set in Venice where, in a luxurious palazzo, a banquet offered by the beautiful courtesan Giulietta is taking place. Behind the scenes, the chorus and two female voices (Giulietta and Nicklausse) unite in a *barcarolle*: "Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour". In both the vocal and instrumental version (which we shall hear this evening), Offenbach's music evokes the image of a gondola that is rocking gently in the evening mist of the lagoon, awaiting what is expected to be a night of love in a mysterious, enchanted Venice. What is surprising, however, is that in this case Offenbach limits himself to reviving the theme of the nymphs and elves from his earlier romantic opera from 1864, *Die Rheinnixen*. Nevertheless, the *Barcarolle* as we know it, evokes

landscapes that are typical of the lagoon, conjuring up small lakes, canals, and a dreamlike, sensual atmosphere.

Countless examples of this close relationship between nature and music in the nineteenth century are to be found in opera. As far as Giuseppe Verdi is concerned, it suffices to mention the impetuous wind of the chorus in the third act of *Rigoletto*, or the violent storm at the beginning of *Otello*. On the other hand, the short but incredibly intense prelude to the first act of *La traviata*, which debuted at none other than La Fenice on 6 March 1853, not only evokes a view of the soul when love and death are symbolically intertwined, but also the two characteristics of the main character: sufferance and sensitivity on the one hand, and exuberance and a love for life on the other. The beginning is therefore characterised by sounds that are diaphanous and transparent: notes that are almost amorphous, heralding the tragic final that will be repeated identically at the beginning of the third act when Violetta is on her deathbed. After a brief silence, with a dance accompaniment the melody of love strikes up: the heart-breaking theme of “Amami, Alfredo”, Violetta’s desperate plea in the second act to her lover in his house in the country, “in the heart of nature dressed up for Spring,” it says in *Dame aux camélias*, which the opera is based on, “a benign gift each year, far from the commotion of the city”, in a refuge of nature where one can “love without shame and without fear”. The sincere, exhilarating expressiveness of this melody returns a little later, accompanied by the imaginative and brilliant patterns of the first violins, portraying the frivolous and worldly aspect of the young woman’s character. This is an aspect that will be redeemed by authentic love and the ability to love, but one that will clash with a tragic destiny that is clear from the very start, since Violetta’s fate is a climb towards redemption that is as exhausting as it is futile since men and nature itself are hindering it.

After the storms, seascapes and the fascination of the lagoon, we come to the majestic surge of river water, the Moldau, a source of life and history, but also a world that inspires sounds and harmony. While the enchanting flow of the Danube was an inspiration for the sweet, nostalgic melodious strains of Johann Strauss Jr’s most famous waltz, thanks to Bedřich Smetana, the course of the Moldau became the symbol of the Czech nation: “almost as if it were a gushing idea of the particular meaning of patriotic culture”. Embracing in a certain sense the metaphor of the symphony as a river that originates from a vast number of tiny streams that are seeking one another, *La Moldava (Vltava)* is the second of the six symphonic poems that make up the *Má Vlast (My Fatherland)* cycle, which was composed between 1874 and 1879 and inspired by the landscape, history, and legends of Bohemia.

Smetana’s *The Moldau* is the fascinating portrayal of the river as it flows from its source to its mouth, in other words, from southern Bohemia to *Mělník* where it flows into the Elba. It begins with gurgling sources, depicted by the wavelike motif of the flutes and clarinets, before continuing with the famous, melancholic theme linked to the river, which is an adaptation of an Italian song from the Renaissance (“Fuggi, fuggi, fuggi”). Following the course of the Moldau, Smetana is also describing episodes of everyday life: hunting in the woods with the calls of the horns, village dances at a peasant wedding, and the aquatic dances of nymphs in the moonlight by the strings, woodwind, and harmonious harp. In an agitated passage, on the other hand, we have the brass and percussion that are describing Saint John’s rapids. The river then resumes its solemn flow before finally arriving in Prague where it flows beneath

Vyserhad Fortress – where the main theme of the first poem in the cycle, *Vyserhad*, reappears, and then flows away to embrace the Elba.

The composer not only ‘describes’ where the river originates and flows, he also evokes the emotions that a primordial element and symbol of life such as water awakens in him. Karl Gustav Carus, a German scientist and painter, once said: “Close your body’s eyes and ears so your spirit can hear the mystical element that Nature imparts with such extraordinary emotive power”. Bedřich Smetana seems to have had these very words in mind when he translated into music the thought that creates emotion.

MICHELE GAMBA CONDUCTOR

Born in Milan, Michele Gamba not only studied piano and composition at the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory, but also graduated in philosophy at the State University in Milan. He went on to study vocal accompaniment and conducting at the Musikhochschule in Vienna, Accademia Chigiana in Siena, and the Royal Academy in London. After a brilliant start to his career as a piano soloist when he also performed at the Wigmore Hall and Gasteig, he debuted as orchestra conductor in 2009 at the Royal Festival Hall with the Future Firsts of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. He later also worked with the Hamburg Staatsoper as musical assistant. In 2012 he began working with the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in London, first as conductor and coach on the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme, and then, following Sir Antonio Pappano’s personal request, as his assistant and Jette Parker Associate Conductor. At the Royal Opera he conducted Mozart’s *Bastien und Bastienne* and Berio’s *Folk Songs*. In 2015 he was sent by Daniel Barenboim to the Berlin Staatsoper as Kappelmeister and his assistant where he went on to conduct *Le nozze di Figaro* with the production by Jürgen Flimm, where he was met with great acclaim by both the public and critics. In 2016 he debuted at Teatro alla Scala with *I due Foscari*. It was such a success that the invitation to the Scala was renewed in the following years, and he went on to conduct *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *Le nozze di Figaro* and *L’elisir d’amore*. During the following seasons he conducted *Le nozze di Figaro* at the Hamburg Staatsoper, Armida by Rossini at the Opéra National de Montpellier, *L’occasione fa il ladro* at Teatro La Fenice in Venice, *La sonnambula* at the Stuttgart Staatsoper, *Norma* at the Sferisterio in Macerata, *Andrea Chénier* at Teatro Petruzzelli in Bari, and Mozart’s *Requiem* at the Teatro Filarmonico in Verona, and *Rigoletto* at the Rome Opera. In the symphonic field he has worked with important orchestras such as the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale of the Italian State television RAI, Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Orchestra Verdi di Milano, Orchestra I Pomeriggi Musicali, Filarmonica Arturo Toscanini, Duisburger Philharmoniker, Hamburgisches Staatsorchester, Staatskapelle Berlin, Orchestre National de Montpellier, and Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse. He has remained active as a pianist, and recently performed Beethoven’s *Variation Diabelli* in Milan, where he met with great success, and at the 2021 Martina Franca Festival where he played Schubert’s *Winterreise*. His recent engagements include: *Die Zauberflöte* at the Dresden Semperoper; *A Riveder le stelle*, the opening performance at Teatro alla Scala; *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino; *Idomeneo* at the Israeli Opera in Tel Aviv; *La bohème* at the Stuttgart Staatsoper; *L’elisir d’amore* at Teatro alla Scala and at the Regio di Torino; *Rigoletto* at the Berlin Deutsche Oper; *Il barbiere di Siviglia* at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino and in Strasburg; *Macbeth* in Toulouse; *La traviata* in Lisbon.

TEATRO LA FENICE ORCHESTRA

First violins Enrico Balboni♦♦, Fulvio Furlanut, Mauro Chirico, Andrea Crosara, Roberto Dall'Igna, Elisabetta Merlo, Sara Michieletto, Martina Molin, Annamaria Pellegrino, Xhoan Shkreli, Anna Tositti, Maria Grazia Zohar

Second violins Gianaldo Tatone•, Samuel Angeletti Ciaramicoli, Nicola Fregonese, Emanuele Frascini, Davide Gibellato, Chiaki Kanda, Luca Minardi, Elizaveta Rotari, Barbara Kruger ♦, Giorgio Pavan♦

Violas Alfredo Zamarra•, *nnp**, Maria Cristina Arlotti, Elena Battistella, Valentina Giovannoli, Anna Mencarelli, Davide Toso, Lucia Zazzaro ♦

Cellos Francesco Ferrarini♦♦, Nicola Boscaro, Enrico Graziani, Filippo Negri, Antonino Puliafito, Enrico Ferri ♦

Double basses Matteo Liuzzi•, Walter Garosi, Ennio Dalla Ricca, Marco Petruzzi

Flutes Stella Ingrosso♦♦, Luca Clementi, Fabrizio Mazzacua

Oboes Giovanni Pistis♦♦, Alessandro Rauli♦

English Horn inglese Angela Cavallo

Clarinets Simone Simonelli•, Federico Ranzato

Bassoons Marco Giani•, Fabio Grandesso

Horns Konstantin Becker•, Loris Antiga, Adelia Colombo, Vincenzo Musone

Trumpets Guido Guidarelli•, Eleonora Zanella

Trombones Giuseppe Mendola•, Federico Garato

Bass Trombones Claudio Magnanini

Tuba Alberto Azzolini

Tympani Dimitri Fiorin•

Percussion Paolo Bertoldo, Claudio Cavallini, Diego Desole

Harp Eva Perfetti♦♦

♦ first violin
• main part
♦ completed