

Concerts of Thursday, June 1, and Saturday, June 3, 2017, at 8:00p

Robert Spano, Conductor

Twyla Robinson, soprano

Clifton Forbis, tenor

Daniel Sumegi, bass

Mark Buller (b. 1986)

The Songs of Ophelia (2017)

World Premiere, commissioned by the Antinori Foundation and the Rapido! Composition Competition for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Robert Spano, Music Director.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Four Sea Interludes from Peter Grimes, Opus 33a (1945)

I. *Dawn. Lento e tranquillo*

II. *Sunday Morning. Allegro spiritoso*

III. *Moonlight. Andante comodo e rubato*

IV. *Storm. Presto con fuoco*

Intermission

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

Act I from *Die Walküre* (1870)

In order of vocal appearance:

Siegmond: Clifton Forbis, tenor

Sieglinde: Twyla Robinson, soprano

Hunding: Daniel Sumegi, bass

English surtitles by Ken Meltzer

Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

The Songs of Ophelia (2017)

Mark Buller was born in Silver Spring, Maryland, on July 26, 1986. These are the world premiere performances. *The Songs of Ophelia* is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, suspended cymbal, tambourine, bass drum, harp, and strings. Approximate performance time is six minutes.

These concerts feature the world premiere of *The Songs of Ophelia*, by American composer Mark Buller. The work was commissioned for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Music Director Robert Spano by the Antinori Foundation and the Rapido! Composition Competition.

I've always been interested in the stories of lesser characters, the people on the margins. The concert this evening includes excerpts from Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* and Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Both feature women about whom we find ourselves wishing we knew more: what is Ellen's back story, and what happens to her after the death of Peter? And why isn't Sieglinde the sibling who gets to pull Notung from the tree?

In keeping with this theme, I decided to tell the story of Ophelia, a character who meets an unfortunate demise in large part because of Hamlet. For the duration of Shakespeare's play, we learn surprisingly little about this otherwise important character. Even her dramatic death is mentioned only in passing: having gone mad, she climbs into a willow tree, which breaks, plunging her into the brook below.

The Songs of Ophelia tells her story through a series of "songs." We meet her amidst the tumult surrounding the affairs at the Danish court, where her playfulness and humor provide momentary distraction — but disaster is not far off. Finally, Ophelia's madness becomes evident, something I only briefly dwell upon. In the end, we are left with only her memory.

—Mark Buller

Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*, Opus 33a (1945)

Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft, England, on November 22, 1913, and died in Aldeburgh, England, on December 4, 1976. The first performance of the opera, *Peter Grimes*, took place at the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, England, on June 7, 1945, Reginald Goodall,

conducting. The *Four Sea Interludes* are scored for two piccolos, two flutes, two oboes, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, piccolo trumpet, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bells in B-flat and E-flat, side drum, tambourine, bass drum, gong, xylophone, cymbals, suspended cymbals, harp, and strings. Approximate performance time is sixteen minutes.

First Classical Subscription Performances: January 11, 12, and 13, 1979, Louis Lane, Conductor.

Most Recent Classical Subscription Performances: February 20, 21, and 22, 2003, Oliver Knussen, Conductor.

In 1942, Benjamin Britten attended a performance of his *Sinfonia da Requiem* by Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. At Koussevitsky's suggestion, and with the support of the Koussevitsky Music Foundation, Britten began work on a full-scale opera.

While in Hollywood, Britten read an article about the life and poetry of George Crabbe. Britten was immediately drawn to Crabbe's 1810 poem *The Borough*, with its vivid descriptions of life in the seaside town of Aldeburgh. One of the characters in *The Borough* is the fisherman Peter Grimes. In Crabbe's poem, Grimes is in many ways a malignant character, with a mind "untouched by pity, unstung by remorse, and uncorrected by shame."

Britten and his librettist Montagu Slater modified Peter Grimes's character into a greatly disturbed, but in many ways misunderstood outsider. Crabbe's Grimes flaunts society's conventions at every turn. But in Britten's opera, the title character's conflicting desires for independence and acceptance by society lead to his ruin.

The story of Grimes's downfall is told against the backdrop of the ever-present and omnipotent sea. As Britten explained:

For most of my life, I have lived closely in touch with the sea. My parents' house in Lowestoft directly faced the sea, and my life as a child was colored by the fierce storms that sometimes drove ships on our coast and ate away whole stretches of neighboring cliffs. In writing *Peter Grimes*, I wanted to express my awareness of the perpetual struggle of men and women whose livelihood depends upon the sea—difficult though it is to treat such a universal subject in theatrical form.

Indeed, while the sea is the basis of Grimes's livelihood, it ultimately proves to be the instrument of his death.

In *Peter Grimes*, Britten created one of opera's most haunting and unforgettable characters. The orchestra too plays a crucial dramatic role, perhaps most

notably in the Interludes that bridge scenes of various Acts, and vividly depict the mysterious, powerful, and ever-changing sea. The *Sea Interludes* have also established a regular presence in the concert hall.

The *Four Sea Interludes* are played without pause.

I. *Dawn. Lento e tranquillo*—This Interlude, appearing between the Prologue and Act I, is built upon three motifs that appear in rapid succession. The flutes and violins play a mournful phrase. The clarinets, harp, and violas interject a swirling figure, capped by somber wind and brass chords. The brief interlude builds to a climax that quickly subsides.

II. *Sunday Morning. Allegro spiritoso*—The second Interlude that serves to launch Act II opens with a tolling horn ostinato that soon accompanies a lively syncopated woodwind figure. A descending phrase leads to the introduction by the cellos and violas of Ellen Orford's song, "Glitter of waves and glitter of sunlight..."

III. *Moonlight. Andante comodo e rubato*—In this brooding Interlude at the start of the final Act, chords in the winds and lower strings are occasionally punctuated by a flickering motif interjected by the flutes and harp. The Interlude is constructed as an arch that grows in power, and then abates.

IV. *Storm. Presto con fuoco*—The Interlude between the two scenes of Act I opens with a menacing syncopated motif that returns throughout. Toward the latter part of this generally tumultuous piece, a lyrical section appears in the form of a reprise of Peter's monologue from the preceding scene: "What harbour shelters peace, away from tidal waves, away from storms?" But soon, the arching melody is overwhelmed by the fury of the tempest.

Act I from *Die Walküre* (1870)

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany, on May 22, 1813, and died in Venice, Italy, on February 13, 1883. The first performance of *Die Walküre* took place at the Hoftheater in Munich, Germany, on June 26, 1870, with Franz Wüllner, conducting. Act I of *Die Walküre* is scored for soprano, tenor, and bass solos, piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, four Wagner tubas, three trumpets, three trombones, bass trumpet, bass trombone, contrabass trombone, tuba, timpani, two harps, and strings. Approximate performance time is sixty-three minutes.

First Classical Subscription Performances: January 18, 19, and 20, 1979, Richard Kness, Tenor, Joyce Barker, Soprano, Ara Berberian, bass, Robert Shaw, Conductor.

Richard Wagner's creation of his epic *The Ring of the Nibelung*, "A stage-festival play for three days (*Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*) and a

preliminary evening (*Das Rheingold*),” spanned twenty-eight years of the German composer’s life. In 1848, Wagner began the prose sketch of what ultimately became the *Ring*’s final opera, *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*). In August of 1876, the premiere of the complete 18-hour *Ring* cycle took place at Bayreuth, Germany, in the theater Wagner specially constructed for festival performances of his masterwork.

The two principal sources for the story of Wagner’s *Ring* Cycle are *The Poetic Edda*, a collection of ancient Norse poems first transcribed in the twelfth century, and the thirteenth-century *Nibelungenlied*. Wagner employed these ancient tales as a forum for his own philosophical views. In an 1854 letter to his friend August Röckel, Wagner described the meaning of his *Ring*:

We must learn to die, in fact to die in the most absolute sense of the word. Fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness, and it arises only where love itself has already faded. How did it come about that mankind so lost touch with this bringer of the highest happiness to everything living that in the end everything they did, everything they undertook and established, was done solely out of fear of the end?

My poem shows how....The course of the drama thus shows the necessity of accepting and giving way to the changeability, the diversity, the multiplicity, the eternal newness of reality and of life.

The *Ring* is one of the most significant works in the history of lyric theater. In the *Ring*, Wagner attempted to move away from what he viewed as the singer-oriented excesses of French and Italian grand opera to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total art work”), a fusion of text, music, and stage drama.

One of the most revolutionary aspects of the *Ring* is Wagner’s is the elevation of the orchestra from its traditional role as accompanist to that of another protagonist in the drama. This, Wagner achieved not only by the deployment of an ensemble of impressive size and color, but also by the ingenious use of the *leitmotif* (“leading motif”), symbolic musical phrases.

The power, beauty, and eloquence of several orchestral episodes in Wagner’s *Ring* have assured their status as favorites, not just within the context of the original operas, but as independent concert works. Although crucial to the plot of the entire *Ring*, Act I of *Die Walküre* may also function as a riveting, self-contained drama. As such, it receives more than the occasional concert performance.

The Story

A bracing orchestral Prelude depicts a raging storm. The curtain rises on Hunding’s hut. Siegmund (tenor), who is fleeing his enemies, staggers into the hut. Hunding’s wife, Sieglinde (soprano), discovers the exhausted Siegmund.

Although the two do not recognize each other, it is clear they share a powerful bond.

Hunding (bass) finally arrives. After some discussion, Hunding realizes that Siegmund is the foe he has been pursuing. Hunding tells Siegmund that he may stay the night, but in the morning, the two will fight a duel to the death. Hunding and Sieglinde retire to their bedroom.

Alone, Siegmund recalls that his father once told the young boy a sword would rescue him in his hour of need (“Ein Schwert verhiess mir der Vater”). A sudden flash of light shines upon the sword, buried in an ash tree that rests in the middle of the hut.

Sieglinde returns, having given Hunding a sleeping potion. She tells Siegmund of her unhappy wedding day, and the appearance of a mysterious stranger, who plunged the sword into the ash tree (“Der Männer Sippe”). Only a true hero has the power to remove the sword.

A gust of wind blows open the door to the hut. Siegmund hails the arrival of spring, and of love (“Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond”). Siegmund names the sword “Notung,” and pulls it from the tree, as Sieglinde watches in amazement. Siegmund and Sieglinde finally realize that they are long-separated brother and sister (“Siegmund heiss ich”). The two rush out into the night.