

## Conductor's Note

You may recall that the opening lines of Dante's "Inferno" with its message of self-discovery and renewal serve as inspiration for the 2016-17 Season of the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus.

Let's start with a disclaimer: I accept that "The Inferno" is not typically the focus for a holiday-season concert, but there is an important point and maybe even a happy ending here. Dante's story is indeed about his traversal of Hades. But as he descends farther and farther he also gets closer to returning home, to seeing the stars again as Dante says in his very last lines. (*E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle*—"and from there we came out once more to see the stars.") For the composers whom I am tying to this story, there is also the homeward tug, and in music as in literature the only way to go back is by forging ahead.

By the time Dante reaches the seventh level of Hell in Canto XVI, he is crossing paths with some pretty unsavory characters. Far behind him in the upper circles of the underworld are the nearly innocent—unbaptized Pagans and otherwise well-behaved adulterers. But here close to the very navel of Satan, the avaricious and the prodigal are condemned to push heavy weights in an eternal circle. So, it comes as almost comic relief when Dante recognizes three crooked politicians, fellow Florentines, and strikes up a mostly pleasant conversation. The three—Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Jacopo Rusticucci—are the real life political allies of the historical Dante, a strange incursion of contemporary politics into fantastical literature. They chat for a while and the three ask Dante to give their regards to Florence when he returns. Dante promises to do this and then skedaddles.

Two thoughts come to mind as I write about these three shady politicians in the week before our election. Firstly, the seventh level of Hell seems just about right as punishment for what I read in the newspapers every day. But, more to the point of this concert, the sweet pull of nostalgia is denied to no one. And even if you are a scoundrel condemned to the bowels of Hell, a pleasant memory of your hometown is at least momentary comfort.

And so it is in this weekend's concerts. Our four composers are no scoundrels, but each wrestles with the Manichean project of pushing forward against the steady undertow of the ever-receding past. Listen carefully to this music and you'll hear the siren song of the goddess Nostalgia, patroness of pandering politicians, Civil War re-enactors, sensitive middle-aged artists and even some of the young gunslingers in contemporary music.

The two emerging composers on today's program escape nostalgia in its most extreme forms. While it's true that in Gity Razaz's *In the Midst of Flux*, we hear the aura of her native Iran, her great strength is that she has roots in this music but not flowers. The sounds of Persia glide easily on the currents of her work, but by refraining from outright quotation and easy autobiography she never lets art become commodity. Kevin Zhang's brand new work, *new true mirrors, furrowed, flooded, extended quite far*, this year's Thomas Nee commission to a UC San Diego graduate student, first seems to have no nostalgic tendencies. But it is in the nature

of a successful “companion piece”—in this case Kevin’s piece is composed for the same instrumental and vocal forces as Stravinsky’s haunting *Symphony of Psalms*—to interrogate its model, and therefore to some degree to live in the past. In an inspired variation of the Stravinsky scoring, Zhang adds solo parts for our two terrific co-concertmasters, Peter Clarke and David Buckley.

And then we come to Beethoven and Stravinsky, whose extraordinary works presented tonight, are convex images of each other. Beethoven, who summited the purified pinnacle of the classical style with his first five symphonies, comes literally down to earth with images of simple country-folk communing with nature in his 6<sup>th</sup>. And Stravinsky, from another peak, gave us the ultimate music of the earth in his *Rite of Spring*, with its quotations of Ukrainian folk songs and images of Pagan sacrifice. In *Symphony of Psalms* he begins the productive middle period of his life in which, again and again, he sought the cool peace of classicism.

It seems that each craved the past of the other.

But, certainly this must be something more than simply envying what you don’t have. It must be that within Beethoven’s classicism there lurked poignant, unuttered memories of nature and her sounds. And perhaps also within Stravinsky’s atavistic excesses, something cooler and more formal lay latent. And then something triggered the dormant seeds. Something made them reach forward and up for the stars even as they sought the past. Was it something traumatic like Beethoven’s deafness, or Stravinsky’s permanent exile from Russia? Or was it perhaps something inner and more basic, closer to what the poet Wendell Berry meant in his poem “History,” that “learning the landmarks and the ways of the land so that I could go back, if I wanted to, my mind grew new and lost the backward way.”

It is the fate of great art, first to seek and then to lose the backward way.

Steven Schick