

CONDUCTOR'S NOTE

So I was reading *The Inferno* late one night, momentarily putting down the latest “Jack Reacher” novel to admire the elegant and muscular *terza rima*, Dante Alighieri’s interlocking three-line rhyme scheme, when it hit me. Sure, *The Inferno* is about the punishment that awaits gluttony, braggadocio, and lechery, but it’s also a kind of crazy road trip, the search for an elusive pathway of redemption and truth, where surprise, horror, and fascination lie just around every corner.

The very first lines are classic suspense.

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
Chè la diritta via era smarrita*

In the middle of the path of life
I found myself in a dark woods
Where the true path had been lost

The year is 1300. Dante himself is the narrator, a 35 year-old man half way through his Biblical allotment of 70 years. He is guided by the Roman poet Virgil, literally through Hell and back.

It could be a story by Stephen King or Quentin Tarantino.

It could also be about Beethoven or Luciano Berio or Igor Stravinsky. It could be about nearly anyone, who finds him or herself lost in the middle of life and, not seeing an easy way out, simply plunges ahead into new and uncharted territory. If the story has a happy ending, protagonists talk about “game-changing” moments or skillful pivots. The failures—and there are plenty—remain lost forever.

Dante writes of a precarious moment in the middle of life (*nel mezzo del cammin*), where risks are high and outcomes uncertain. We tell the same story in our 2016-17 season, “Music from the Middle of Life,” and examine, in musical terms, the risks and rewards of a mid-life pivot.

The classic example comes from Beethoven. In the years after he wrote his Heiligenstadt Testament, a heart-wrenching letter to his brother where he acknowledges his growing deafness and admits to considering suicide, his music grows more personal and complex. It’s as though, finding himself in an impossible situation with no easy way out,

he decides to use his art to fight through a personal Hell. The game-changing pivot comes in late 1808 with an extraordinary concert that included the premieres of the 5th and 6th Symphonies, excerpts from the Mass in C, and the 4th Piano Concerto. (All on the same concert; can you imagine?!) Oddly, the sleeper on the program was the 5th Symphony, heard here tonight. Initial reviews failed to recognize its impact, but ETA Hoffmann's 1810 essay, in which he writes that the music "sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror...of infinite yearning," forged our view of this symphony as one of the greatest masterpieces of all time.

But, what about the other composers on tonight's program and throughout the season? Certainly not all of them found themselves in Beethoven's tortured state!

Moments of reckoning come in many forms. Perhaps Bryce Dessner's haunting *Lachrimae* is his pivot. It is the best known of his recent works that seek a bridge between his past as a rock guitarist and his recent career as an orchestral composer. And, certainly Anna Thorvaldsdottir, the extraordinary Icelandic composer, is not old enough for a mid-life crisis. Yet, as her *Aeriality* flexes its muscles in a way that connects the refinements of her compositional language with the raw power of her native landscape, I feel confident that years from now this will be judged her break-away moment. And those of us who knew Anna as a graduate student in UCSD's music department are cheering her on with pride.

Each concert in our season will point to a turning point in a composer's life. In December it will be the etched clarity of Stravinsky's neo-classical *Symphony of Psalms*, so different from the effusions of his earlier ballets. We'll also hear the other great Beethoven symphony from that fateful 1808 concert, the 6th. In February you will hear more mid-period Beethoven in his Violin Concerto, really an anti-concerto that looks more towards the genre busting pieces of the late 20th century than back to the inherited forms of the classical concerto. The catalytic work on that program will be Luciano Berio's extraordinary *Sinfonia*, a post-modern minestrone of texts by Levi-Strauss and Beckett, musical quotations from Mahler, and a touching tribute to the recently assassinated Martin Luther King.

We'll pile on with Verdi's mammoth *Requiem* and a 21st century tone poem by the young Canadian Vivian Fung. We'll add Mussorgsky,

and in David Chase's final concert with the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus, Samuel Barber's celebration of the eternal erotic in *The Lovers*.

And throughout, in one concert after another, we'll listen to the music of transformation, of triumph over crisis, of personal and artistic agency. And as we do, we'll hear not the dusty fixtures of a museum, but the burgeoning sounds of a living music: antidote to paralysis and firewall against conformity. We'll be reminded, as our friend the naturalist and author Barry Lopez often says, that art is humankind's principal means of discovery. "Let science verify the facts," he is fond of saying, "but through art we will discover the truth."

Steven Schick