

# MUSICAL WORDS

THROUGHOUT THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY'S 2015-2016 SEASON,  
MUSIC AND STORY COMBINE THEIR POWERFUL FORCES.

BY RAPHAEL MAURICE



David Robertson

DILIP VISHWANATH

*Without music, life would be an error.*—Nietzsche

Music is the means of storytelling this season at Powell Hall. Composers inspired by great literature will captivate and delight audiences. But while music may “tell” the stories of Cinderella or Romeo and Juliet, or at least evoke those familiar tales, music remains its own “culturally acquired language,” as Music Director David Robinson phrases it—one that is “natural for people all over the planet.”

So there is musical language and the idiom of texts, stories, tales, and literature. Sometimes, Robertson observes, “Music and text get together and produce a single work, where one conveyor of meaning is the text, but another is the tones that accompany that text.” Think opera or oratorio, Richard Strauss’s *Capriccio* or Handel’s *Messiah* this season. “But other times music provides tension between music and text.” Think Mahler’s Symphony No. 4, with angelic sounds of children dreaming of a heaven without hunger.

But amidst all these possible meanings—textual, narrative, emotional, musical—there is no single rule for interpretation. “Each audience member makes his or her own meaning,” Robertson says. And so there is much room for listeners to infuse their own meaning into symphonies, concertos, selections from operas and ballets, etc. When music strikes, and then moves into our bodies and minds, a myriad of possible interpretations leap to life. Music is not an absolute plotline, grid, or rigid binary set. Rather, the stories and tales employed this season are inseparable from the supremacy of sound and performance.

As to meaning, audiences may impose their own interpretations on each composition and performance. There is always that mysterious unspoken pact between the performers and the audience, and the deep relationships between sound and ear, intention and subjectivity, plot and personal memory. With literature and storytelling roiling under the surface of sound, listeners find their own personal “correspondence” with the not-so-external event.

Leoš Jánáček’s *Taras Bulba*, which opens the season, was inspired by a short work by Nikolay Gogol, author of *The Overcoat*, *Dead Souls*, *Diary of a Madman*, and other wonderful and strange works of literature. Jánáček’s piece moves effortlessly from the melancholic to the triumphant, while telling the story of two sons who go off to fight with the Cossacks in a war against Poland. Again, despite literary references, the listener need not read Gogol’s historical short story in order to find bearings or yield to the performance. Rather, Jánáček’s sym-

phonic rhapsody should transmit the values and feel of that period and of Gogol's fictive world. The listener is free to supply multiple meanings to the sonic textures and movements of each performance.

Don Quixote, Macbeth, Parsifal, and Cinderella appear this season as well, courtesy of Richard Strauss, Wagner, and Prokofiev. The listener needn't run to the nearest library to revive those buried memories of Cervantes and Shakespeare; nor is there need to read Medieval morality tales or rehearse the woes and triumphs of a pauper-turned-princess. Let the music carry the water, as it were, for those unfamiliar with these ancient tales of mad knights and kings, of personal crusades, of glass slippers and pumpkin-coaches. Music speaks a universal language. Let the themes resonate and sound and thrum.

From Gershwin's *An American in Paris* to Gluck's *Don Juan* Ballet Suite, audiences will encounter scenes that recall (for some) Gene Kelly dancing in the City of Lights, moving his feet and body rhythmically to some of the most joyful and American music ever written. In the case of Juan, despite moral reservations, audiences may yield to the fatal charms of that serial seducer from Seville.

In February and March, Powell Hall becomes the home of the St. Louis Symphony's Shakespeare Festival, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death. There is no need to admit the great holes in one's reading of Shakespeare's art, for Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, et al will convey—potentially as much

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MARCIA ROSENGÅRD

Karita Mattila sings Richard Strauss's *Final Scene* from *Capriccio* at Powell Hall, September 25-26.

or more—the brave, new world, the woes of Romeo and Juliet's ill-fated stars, and many Shakespearean themes that live in the *musical word*, the logic and madness of great music, the house of the heart, and in the vital life of keen and eager ears.

Then comes April, a special month of storytelling at the symphony. Audiences will encounter Nordic, mythical creatures, more fairytales, and Candide's "best of all possible worlds." And indeed, what better venue than Powell Hall in which to take in the great tradition of storytelling? Only the lonely or the taciturn will be

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able to refrain from talking about their experiences at Powell Hall this year. Stories heard from the *litterateurs* and composers will make other stories spring to life.

*Without music, life would be an error.* This is true whether one is familiar with the works of a specific German philosopher or not. There seems to be an inherent relationship that cycles around and around between audience and orchestra this season. Both listeners and performers share a common goal, a thread, a bond based on appreciation and trust. You, the audience, will no doubt be enriched as you listen; and in turn, the St. Louis Symphony will in some beautiful and ineffable way be enlivened by your participation. Let the music and its great stories begin!

*Raphael Maurice is a writer, poet, and musician. He lives on Cherokee Street with his wife and comrade, Jill Maurice. An avid music fan, he looks forward to seeing you at Powell Hall.*