

A WALK IN THE WOODS

THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY PARTNERS WITH WEBSTER UNIVERSITY IN A
NEW-LOOK *PETER AND THE WOLF* ON THANKSGIVING WEEKEND.

BY RAPHAEL MAURICE



KEITH SAUNDERS

David Robertson conducts Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf on Thanksgiving weekend at Powell Hall.

In 1936, Serge Prokofiev was commissioned by the Moscow Children's Theater to write a work that would create a stir among young people and bring music closer to their lives. In four days, Prokofiev wrote the wonderful score for *Peter and the Wolf*, and although the debut was poorly attended, Prokofiev's masterpiece continues to delight audiences of all ages today. Indeed, *Peter and the Wolf* is one of the finest introductions to classical music, fairy tales, and the joys of risk-taking, and is one of the delights of childhood and adulthood.

Prokofiev brings a musical menagerie—a duck, a cat, a bird, a wolf, hunters, and a boy—charmingly to the ear. Individual instruments and sections of the orchestra represent characters in the piece, with each character given its own identifying music. A narrator tells the fantastic tale, with an understanding that fairy tales are not just for children. From Grimm to

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Lewis Carroll, there exists within such stories a bit of darkness mixed in with the playful. Prokofiev captured that duality within his *Peter and the Wolf*. I like to think of this particular tale as subtly bouncing along, lulling and bewitching each listener as he or she gleans the subtext of danger within the piece.

If Prokofiev's one achievement had been this work for children, that achievement would still be enormous. To draw new and fresh audiences time and time again is one of the many blessings *Peter and the Wolf*

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bestows. *Peter and the Wolf* has the capacity to make you feel young again, as young as the children you may escort. With its shadowy subtexts, in a work of under a half an hour, you may listen and feel the holiday season coming in beautifully, exuberantly, and strangely. As November weather comes, the levity and lightheartedness of such a great fairy tale is just the ticket before winter arrives, when we can all use a bit of the strange and wondrous.

This Thanksgiving weekend, the St. Louis Symphony and Webster University are joining together to bring this piece to the stage once again. I had the chance to speak to Seth Jackson, production designer for *Peter and the Wolf*, who gave some clues as to how these performances might feel and sound.

The St. Louis Symphony is collaborating with Webster on *Peter and the Wolf*. Can you tell us something about how this relationship began and continues?

The Conservatory of Theatre Arts at Webster University has a long history of partnering with performing arts organizations in the St. Louis region. When this project was first presented to us it seemed a natural progression in our relationship with the St. Louis Symphony and created great opportunity for our students to express themselves in a professional environment.

Are you interpreting Prokofiev's fairy tale in a traditional way? How will the performance look, as it were?

From a visual standpoint, this will be a modern take on a classic piece. Our culture today, especially for children, is so based in video imagery—from television shows to video games. We are approaching this piece in much the same way. We'll be utilizing multiple projection surfaces to paint abstract imagery to tell the story from a visual perspective in a way that will be engaging to young and old alike.

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Do you find any darker elements in *Peter and the Wolf*, and if so, do you think children respond to those?

It's funny when I think back to the fables and stories I was familiar with as a child. Almost all of them were dark! You don't think about it as a child, you just see it for what it is—a morality tale, a good vs. evil, whatever. But looking back, those were actually some violent stories. I remember reading a quote once that said, "fairy tales don't tell children that dragons are real, they know that. They tell them how to defeat them." I think that is a healthy approach to this project as well.

What are some of your ideas about interpreting such a well-known musical piece for children?

Our main approach is to stretch the visual imagery beyond what people think of when they think of a "children's" story. We don't want to just show cartoon images of animals, we want to treat the audience to visual storytelling through artistic expression. That way the music and the visual elements share the story together and create a cohesive experience for young and old alike.

What hopes do you have for the reception of this piece?

If we do our jobs right, we'll be a support to the piece. We'll help share the story using the visual tools at our disposal. Most importantly, I hope we open younger people up to the magic of hearing a live symphony. If our visual contribution helps draw them into this amazing reality that occurs when 90 people create live music, we all win.

The St. Louis Symphony performs Peter and the Wolf at Powell Hall, November 27-29.

Raphael Maurice is a writer, poet, and musician.