

New Enchantments: Fairy Tale Music for Bassoon

CORNELIA SOMMER, *bassoon*

Notes on the Program

Rossini/Sommer: *Fantasy on “La Cenerentola”*

La Cenerentola (1817) by Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) is one of the earliest operas based on a single fairy tale that is still popular today. Although ostensibly inspired by Charles Perrault’s *Cinderella*, *La Cenerentola* eliminates the magical elements of the story—no fairy godmother, no rats transformed into coachmen, no ball gown that disappears at midnight. However, prevalent throughout the opera are dreams and transformations; while there is no literal representation of magic, these two plot elements serve as a substitute and help the story retain its fairy tale affect.

This new piece for bassoon and piano is modeled on opera fantasies written in the nineteenth century. Often for a solo instrument and piano, these fantasies were a low-budget way for the public to hear opera music, sometimes acting as advertisements for the opera itself. As was typical for such pieces, this fantasy features several virtuosically embellished arias from *La Cenerentola*, including Cinderella’s first aria, “Una volta c’era un rè,” and the comic aria of the Prince’s valet, “Come un’ape ne’ giorni d’aprile.”

Rodríguez: *Mamá María*

Mamá María creates a musical painting of *María la Cruz*, a fairy tale by the award-winning Puerto Rican author Carmen Leonor Rivera-Lassén. In *María la Cruz*, Rivera-Lassén describes how, in a small town in Puerto Rico where mothers and their children starved, María la Cruz lived in a cave near a river and cooked to feed the children and their mothers. Suddenly, everyone in the village was afflicted by a great disease that forced them to leave their homes. Before leaving, to protect their children, the mothers left them in the cave of María who would be able to feed them. As time passed, María had to rest in a sleep from which she would not be able to return. But first, worried about how the children could feed themselves, she decided to go with them to the river. By dawn, the children had become coquíes (frogs native to Puerto Rico). María, before sleeping forever, turned them into coquíes so that they would not suffer or go hungry. From that moment onwards, on the banks of the river, you can hear the singing of a chorus of coquíes.

Mamá María navigates the fairy tale of Rivera-Lassén through different variations that gradually transform from the mystical, the conflict, and the magic to reach the

redemption of transformation. The piece aims to represent María's last moments as she has to make the decision to leave the children safely and with sustenance before her eternal rest.

(Notes courtesy of the composer.)

Matsui: *Hanasaka Jiisan*

Hanasaka Jiisan (The Old Man Who Made Withered Trees Blossom) is an old Japanese folktale about friendship and loss of loved ones. The tale, with its colorful imageries and characters, brings to life the true treasures of friendship: fun, discovery, pain of loss, and the beautiful ways in which a dear one continues to live on in our conscience.

The story takes place in a small village deep in the mountains (I. Koko horé wan wan! - Dig here, woof woof!), where an old man lives with his best friend, the dog. Now this dog possesses a special ability of sniffing out treasures underground. And when he discovers it, he barks: "Koko horé wan wan!" The jealous neighbor one day convinces the old man to let him borrow the dog (II. Inu no shi - Death of the dog). The dog disobeys the neighbor, and instead of treasures, finds him insects and rubbish. Enraged, the neighbor kills the dog.

Learning of his friend's death, the old man mourns for days (III. Aenai tomoé - For a friend lost). He is unable to stop thinking about his dog and is filled with remorse and regret. One night, he hears the voice of the dog telling him to go out the next morning and to throw his ashes on the withered cherry trees in the village (IV. Mafuyu no hana zakari - Midwinter blossoms). The old man, at first in disbelief, does as he is told. To his amazement, ashes bring the withered trees to full blossom. Overcome with joy, the old man runs throughout the village throwing ashes onto the trees. The villagers are amazed, and a local lord hears of the miracle and rewards the old man with a lifetime of riches.

(Notes courtesy of the composer.)

Schumann: *Märchenbilder*

Originally for viola and piano, *Märchenbilder* (Fairy Tale Pictures) is not based on a particular fairy tale, though Schumann was acquainted with Hans Christian Andersen and even set some of his stories to song in his op. 40. Perhaps the most likely literary influence on *Märchenbilder* is a letter Schumann received shortly before composing the piece in 1851 from a lesser-known poet named Louis de Rieux. The letter contained a four-part poem, and de Rieux suggested that Schumann write a sonata based on it. The poetry frequently mentions fairy tales to create a sense of nostalgia and to create a bridge between dreams and reality.

One possible interpretation of the piece is that each "picture" forms an episode of a typical fairy tale. Today you will hear the first half of the tale: in the first movement, Schumann opens with a soaring melody that invites us to listen to the story, and in the second, a galloping rhythm and contrasting encounters suggest a magical journey.

Rameau: *Un conte de fées*

In eighteenth-century France, the genre of *opéra féerie* established the first true example of fairy tale music. In contrast to earlier musical theater, the fairy tale source was central to the plot, rather than a conventional addition. Rameau's *Zaïs*, often considered to be an *opéra féerie*, tells the story of a genie who disguises himself as a shepherd in order to win the affection of a mortal woman; the action of the opera unfolds around the trials that Zaïs must undergo to prove his love. For the French, *opéra féerie* elevated specifically French culture—their fairy tales—to the level of the traditional mythological stories that had previously been the main source for musical theater plots.

Un conte de fées combines five instrumental numbers from *Zaïs* to create the outline of a fairy tale. The arrangement is loosely modeled on Rameau's great chamber work *Pièces de clavecin en concerts*, several movements of which he later adapted as instrumental sections of his operas. Although the *Pièces de clavecin* do not include winds, Rameau was known for his colorful wind writing, especially for the bassoon.

Grafe: *Rumpelstilzchentanz*

The Grimm Brothers' tale of Rumpelstiltskin features a conniving imp who convinces a poor girl to trade away her firstborn child. Rumpelstiltskin gives the girl one last chance—if she can guess his name, she can keep the child. Unbeknownst to Rumpelstiltskin, she follows him one night and watches him dancing grotesquely and bragging about how she will never guess that his name is Rumpelstiltskin. When the girl is able to correctly guess his name, he destroys himself in a rage.

This bassoon duet captures the bizarre dance of Rumpelstiltskin. After a halting beginning, the dance begins gleefully, grounded by a lopsided quintuplet ostinato. At one point, Rumpelstiltskin falls silent, worried that he has revealed too much. A tentative melody with bursts of activity eventually leads back to the grotesque dance and concludes with a frenzied exchange between the two bassoons.