

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2015-2016 Mellon Grand Classics Season

October 30 and November 1, 2015

LEONARD SLATKIN, CONDUCTOR
CONRAD TAO, PIANO

CONRAD TAO

Pángu

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Allegro agitato

Mr. Tao

Intermission

RICHARD STRAUSS

Symphonia Domestica, Opus 53

Introduction: Themes of Husband, Wife and Child
Scherzo: Parents' Happiness — The Child at Play
Cradle Song
Adagio: Doing and Thinking — Love Scene —
Dreams and Cares
Finale: Merry Argument — Happy Conclusion
Played without pause

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

CONRAD TAO

Born 11 June 1994 in Urbana, Illinois

Pángu (2012)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Hong Kong, 29 September 2012; Hong Kong Cultural Centre Concert Hall; Hong Kong Philharmonic; Jaap van Zweden, conductor

THESE PERFORMANCES MARK THE PSO PREMIERE

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 7 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings

The story of *Pángu* is a creation myth of charm and philosophical weight. The universe begins concentrated inside an egg in which the great *Pángu* himself sleeps for 18,000 years. On waking he finds himself in an endlessly dark space and proceeds to cut through it with his enormous limbs. For another 18,000 years the persistent god goes about separating heaven and earth from one another. After this monumental task is finished, *Pángu* is laid to rest — his left eye becomes the sun, his right eye the moon, his breath the wind, his voice the thunder, his body the great geographic regions of the world, his blood the rivers of the earth, and so on. In this myth are the fundamental ideas of yin and yang, which are perfectly balanced at the beginning of the tale and become distinct as the dark yin becomes the earth and the pristine yang becomes the sky. Additionally, *Pángu* is known as the one who broke free from darkness and embraced the light.

And so *Pángu*, for full orchestra, aims to capture the whirling claustrophobia of the egg, the enormous weight of earth and heaven separating, and the thrilling world left behind as *Pángu* ends his journey. The work's opening flurry of notes conveys anxious excitement, and the sharp melodic figures that offset it reflect *Pángu*'s attempts to break through his shell. As he begins to slowly widen the gap between land and sky, ponderous chords move 'like molasses,' evolving slowly and methodically. And then, of course, there is the transformation of *Pángu*'s body into the earth we know today; the opening swirl of sound returns, more confident this time around. We survey the newly created landscape, its peaks and valleys, its beds of water and its resplendent diversity. In this heterogeneity is a beautiful unity, a cohesion made up of contrasting parts. The earth and the sky need each other, and so *Pángu* ends with a series of chords encompassing the entire sonic spectrum of the orchestra.

— Conrad Tao

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Born 26 September 1898 in Brooklyn, New York; died 11 July 1937 in Hollywood, California.

Concerto in F for Piano and Orchestra (1925)

PREMIERE OF WORK: New York City, 3 December 1925; Carnegie Hall; New York Symphony; Walter Damrosch, conductor; George Gershwin, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 19 November 1933; Syria Mosque; Antonio Modarelli, conductor; George Gershwin, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 33 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony and one of this country's most prominent musical figures for the half-century before World War II, was among the Aeolian Hall audience when George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* exploded above the musical world on February 12, 1924. He recognized Gershwin's genius (and, no doubt, the opportunity for wide publicity), and approached him a

short time later with a proposal for another large-scale work. A concerto for piano was agreed upon, and Gershwin was awarded a commission from the New York Symphony to compose the piece and be the soloist at its premiere and a half dozen subsequent concerts. The story that Gershwin then rushed out and bought a reference book explaining what a concerto is probably is apocryphal. He did, however, study the scores of some of the concertos of earlier masters to discover how they had handled the problems of structure and instrumental balance. He made the first extensive sketches for the work while in London during May 1925. By July, back home, he was able to play for his friends large fragments of the evolving work, tentatively entitled "New York Concerto." The first movement was completed by the end of that month, the second and third by September, and the orchestration carried out in October and November, by which time the title had become simply Concerto in F.

Gershwin provided a short analysis of the Concerto for the *New York Tribune*: "The first movement employs a Charleston rhythm. It is quick and pulsating, representing the young, enthusiastic spirit of American life. It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the kettledrums, supported by other percussion instruments and with a Charleston motif introduced by bassoon, horns, clarinets and violas. The principal theme is announced by the bassoon. Later, a second theme is introduced by the piano. The second movement has a poetic, nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues, but in a purer form than that in which they are usually treated. The final movement is an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping the same pace throughout."

Though Gershwin based his Concerto loosely on classical formal models, its structure is episodic in nature. His words above do not mention several other melodies that appear in the first and second movements, nor the return of some of those themes in the finale as a means of unifying the work's overall structure.

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born 11 June 1864 in Munich; died 9 September 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen

Symphonia Domestica, Opus 53 (1902-1903)

PREMIERE OF WORK: New York City, 21 March 1904; Carnegie Hall; Wetzler Symphony Orchestra; Richard Strauss, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 17 April 1953; Syria Mosque; William Steinberg, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 44 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, oboe d'amore, clarinet in D, clarinet in A, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, four saxophones, four bassoons, contrabassoon, eight horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps and strings

Pauline de Ahna, the daughter of an old and honorable German family with long associations with the military and Bavarian patriotism, showed a talent for music as a girl and graduated as a singer from the Munich Conservatory in 1886. Richard Strauss first met her through his maternal uncle George Pschorr, whose family ran one of the most successful breweries in Munich. (Hacker-Pschorr Beer is still a staple of Oktoberfests in Germany and elsewhere.) The de Ahnas knew of Strauss' reputation as one of the country's fastest rising musical stars, and they socialized easily with him, even though his pedigree was rather less exalted than theirs. Strauss became Pauline's vocal coach and friend, frequently visiting the family's home at Feldafing, a village southwest of Munich, and summering at their country villa in Marquartstein. Love developed between the young couple, and Strauss' first masterpiece, *Don Juan*, was inspired by his blossoming feelings for Pauline. Two years after he was appointed conducting assistant to Hans von Bülow at Weimar in 1888, he arranged for her to join the opera company there. She showed excellent skill in her profession — Cosima Wagner, the composer's widow and then director of the Bayreuth Festival, heard her in Munich and cast her as Elisabeth in the first Bayreuth production of *Tannhäuser*, in 1891. Strauss composed his first opera, *Guntram*, expressly for Pauline during this period, and he put the work into production for the 1893-1894 season. At the end of one rehearsal, he passed out comments to the singers, but said nothing to Pauline. Feeling that he was either ignoring her or being obsequiously kind, she threw a tantrum and processed from the stage in a great huff. Strauss ran after her, and furious cries issued from the dressing area. The concertmaster hurried off to inform the soprano that the orchestra would refuse to work with her in future if she persisted in such conduct, but he

was intercepted by Strauss with the announcement, "I'm sorry you should think that necessary. I must inform you that Fräulein de Ahna has just accepted my proposal of marriage."

Strauss and Pauline were married in Weimar on September 10, 1894. His wedding gift to her was the set of four love songs, Op. 27: *Ruhe meine Seele*, *Cäcilie*, *Heimliche Aufforderung* and *Morgen*. There was never any doubt about the pattern and hierarchy of life in the Strauss household — Pauline dictated; Strauss obeyed, and adored her. The daughter of a military general, she kept her husband on a punctual schedule of work to assure his regular productivity and the steady receipt of royalties, daily ordering him away from the breakfast table with the command: "*Richard jetzt gehst componieren!*" ("*Now Richard, go off and compose!*"). He did ("My wife is a bit rough at times," Strauss once admitted Gustav Mahler, "but it's what I need, you know"), and the first years of their marriage yielded some of his most highly regarded creations — *Zarathustra*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Don Quixote*, *Ein Heldenleben*. Though she earned a reputation as a shrew of Brobdingnagian proportions (the Mahlers would cross the street to avoid meeting her), Strauss remained devoted to Pauline, and immortalized her in at least three of his compositions — the "Hero's Companion" episode in *Ein Heldenleben*; the opera *Intermezzo* (though she thought his portrait of her unflattering and made him walk home three paces behind her after the premiere); and his great paean to life among the pots and pans, the *Symphonia Domestica*.

On April 12, 1897, the union of Richard and Pauline Strauss was blessed with issue — a son named Franz, after the composer's father, the best German horn player of his day. The boy was a joy to his parents, and Strauss played with him for hours on end (their favorite game required the composer to transform himself into a child-laden steam locomotive; there were three departures daily) and toted him to concerts and official receptions. (Franz went on to become a lawyer and his father's legal advisor; he died in February 1980.) When plans for Strauss' first tour of America were finalized in 1902, he pledged to compose a new piece for the venture, and settled on the unusual subject of his own home life as its topic. ("I don't see why I shouldn't write a symphony about myself," he explained after completing *Ein Heldenleben* in 1899. "I find myself quite as interesting as Napoleon or Alexander.") The short score was sketched between May 1902 and July 1903, and the last jot was applied to the orchestration on New Year's Eve in Berlin, where Strauss was conductor of the opera. Richard and Pauline sailed for America in late February 1904 (her complaints about seasickness and the deleterious effects of the salt air on her delicate eyes made the trip pass in the expected fashion for Strauss), and were swamped with public and media attention when they arrived in New York. (Pauline calculated that there were too many occasions for which she had to dress, but she always presented herself magnificently, much to the delight of the city's fashion reporters.) Strauss conducted the premiere of the *Symphonia Domestica* in Carnegie Hall on March 21st at the fourth and last concert of a festival in his honor arranged by Herman Hans Wetzler, a German expatriate musician who organized what proved to be a short-lived orchestra in the city. "The reception was stupendous," Strauss reported to his parents, "perhaps eight curtain calls, two laurel wreaths, and the critics, who had been very hostile here, changed their tune." Demand to hear the new work was satisfied with two additional performances at John Wanamaker's department store, whose main sales floor was refitted as a concert hall. Strauss defended the blatantly mercenary aspect of this enterprise by saying, "I think it perfectly honorable for a composer with a wife and child to support to play his works wherever an audience can be assembled, even if it is a department store." Strauss toured some twenty other American cities before returning to Germany, taking with him the sizeable proceeds of his venture, including the \$9,000, a vast sum in 1904, that he had received for the *Symphonia Domestica*. He continued to take pride in the work and conducted it frequently thereafter; it was the only recording he made with the Vienna Philharmonic during a celebration of his eightieth birthday that survived World War II.

Strauss told the New York press that his *Symphonia Domestica*, which he dedicated to "my beloved wife and our boy," represented "a day in the life of my family, partly lyrical, partly humorous." There was considerable criticism that such a hair-curlers-and-burnt-toast topic was not sufficiently lofty for the ministrations of a great composer, but Pauline's spouse countered, "What can be more serious a matter than married life? Marriage is the most serious happening in life, and the holy joy over such a union is intensified by the arrival of a child. Yet life naturally has its funny side, and this I have also introduced into the work in order to enliven it. But I want the Symphony to be taken seriously." Though the *Symphonia Domestica*, the last of Strauss' tone poems save the *Alpine Symphony* of 1915, has drawn the most divergent criticisms of any of his compositions (his biographer George R. Marek said that "one wishes Strauss had not written the piece at all," while the late revered conductor Herbert von Karajan called it "one of Strauss' finest works"), it is among his most carefully integrated and gloriously orchestrated scores.

The *Symphonia Domestica* is divided into five large, continuous movements depicting 24 hours in the life of the Strauss household. Though the composer declined to issue a detailed scenario for the work, he authorized a descriptive analysis by Alfred Kalisch and Percy Pitt for the first London performance, in February 1905, that indicated the following topics for the sections: *Introduction* (which unfolds the themes of Papa, Mama and Child); *Parents' Happiness — The Child at Play* (scherzo); *Cradle Song; Doing and Thinking — Love Scene — Dreams and Cares* (*Adagio*); and *Merry Argument — Happy Conclusion* (the finale, disposed as a boisterous double fugue).

The *Introduction* houses a musical portrait gallery of the family. Strauss displayed various elements of his own personality in the work's opening gestures: "easygoing" (cello); "dreamy" (oboe); "sullen" (clarinets); and "fiery" (violins). Pauline's theme, a gracious melody first announced by the flute, begins with an inversion of the motive from her husband's "easygoing" strain. These ideas are intertwined for a time before the Child arrives on the scene with a tender diatonic theme in the oboe d'amore, an alto oboe popular during Sebastian Bach's day that was reintroduced into concert music with this work. Some strident noises from muted trumpets and trilled woodwinds indicate a more temperamental side of the boy. "Just like his Papa ... just like his Mama," cluck the aunts and uncles, according to a notation in the score.

The scherzo (*Parents' Happiness — The Child at Play*), built upon a frisky transformation of the Child's theme, depicts both horseplay in the living room and a joyously messy bath scene. All this activity inevitably tuckers out the little fellow, who starts to nod off in the *Lullaby*, which alludes to the *Gondola Song* from Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*, Op. 19. Seven taps on the glockenspiel indicate the child's evening bedtime.

The following movement contains three scenes. The first (*Doing and Thinking*), based on the Father's "dreamy" motive, is contemplative and then exultant. The music quiets, and the theme of the Mother re-enters to be interwoven with that of the Father in the voluptuous *Love Scene* that follows. Passions spent, the music again subsides for a thoughtful episode of *Dreams and Cares*.

The glockenspiel sounds the seven notes of the morning alarm, and the household is mustered for the finale, which begins with a double fugue depicting a *Merry Argument*, said to concern the couple's disagreement over the boy's future. The themes of the work are masterfully elaborated in the fugue and in the glowing peroration that serves as the *Happy Conclusion* of the *Symphonia Domestica*.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda