

## CONDUCTOR'S NOTE

All lines eventually break. It's the deal we make when we are born. We live fully; we are as generous as we can be; we hold the people we love close to our hearts. As closely as possible. And if we are very lucky, our line will break some day, as Barbara Bush's just did, peacefully, surrounded by the love of family and with a valedictory glass of bourbon.

But some people aren't lucky. They leave the house one day, the bed unmade and the radio still playing, and they never return. Sandra Bland was arrested on July 10, 2013 after an altercation with a police officer at a routine traffic stop and died in custody three days later. We don't know what happened; yet, we do. It doesn't matter whether you support the police for doing a harrowing and necessary job—which I do—or you align yourselves with the Black Lives Matter crusaders for social justice—which I also do—in 2017, African-Americans accounted for 25% of police-related deaths and just 13% of the population. That statistic should horrify everyone.

But what are we classical musicians supposed to do? Are we not powerless in the face of such a problem? In response, we offer today's concert, neither to point the finger of blame nor to avert our eyes, but as an offering of light, amplifying Martin Luther King's axiom that, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

At the center of everything is Courtney Bryan's remarkable work *Yet Unheard*, for orchestra and chorus, featuring a setting of Sharan Strange's searing poem in memory of Sandra Bland, with the incomparable Helga Davis as soloist. Helga, singing to us on behalf of Sandra Bland, exhorts us to relive the terrible scenario, one that is nearly unimaginable to someone of my position and privilege, yet an all-too-frequent reality for many of my fellow citizens. Through Helga's voice, Courtney Bryan brings us close to the tragedy, makes us feel the heat of it on our faces. The combined voices of the chorus prod us further by asking: "How do we imagine something different, that centers black people, that sees them in the future?" What a stark question! How shocking that it even has to be asked!

We pair Strange's agonizing question and Bryan's extraordinary music with Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem*. Though it was written nearly 130 years ago, Fauré's music still feels fresh and relevant to the question of how we see the future. Fauré's is a "gentle requiem," nearly completely absent of images of fire and fury. Unlike Verdi and Berlioz, he asks for no titanic bass drum strokes to mark the fateful Day of Judgment of the "Dies Irae," nor antiphonal brass bands as the dead are called forth in the "Tuba Mirum." Fauré does indeed set the Dies Irae but it is merely a passing cloud of murky tonality, a transitory problem rather than a final judgment. Instead his *Requiem* is suffused with musical light—through omnipresent organ sounds and luminous writing for chorus and solo voices. Fauré employs an ingenious sleight-of-hand here. By centering the ensemble on the duskier sounds of violas and lower strings—the violins play relatively rarely in *Requiem*—the women's voices sound even brighter and higher than they otherwise would.

Courtney Bryan and Gabriel Fauré would barely recognize each other's worlds. The former has a Web Site, the latter the conservative musical training of 19<sup>th</sup> century France. Courtney lives in 21<sup>st</sup> century New Orleans; Fauré flourished in the *belle époque*. Some might say that Fauré's music sanctifies the old world and Bryan's critiques the new world. But that's wrong; these works are not opposites. Each strives to see the invisible and to touch the ineffable. And in the end, they share a message: the goal of living and dying is to transcend darkness, or in Dante's words at the end of the "Divine Comedy" to "*riveder le stelle*," to see the stars again.

Rounding out our concert is another pairing of light and dark. Rand Steiger's lustrous *Template* for the improvising trumpeter Peter Evans is a study in brilliance. There are Steiger's ingenious musical textures, enhanced by real-time computer modifications of the instrumental sounds. You'll hear things you've never even imagined! And, speaking of the unimaginable, never at the end of the many dozens of Peter Evans performances I've heard has my mouth ever been closed. I dare you to try it! His playing is nothing less than jaw dropping.

In offering a companion to the incandescent music of Rand and Peter, we close the season as we began it, with an invitation to the polymath composer and arranger Asher Tobin Chodos to create an orchestral environment based on an important work of 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz. Here Tobin offers his view of Ornette Coleman's masterpiece *Lonely Woman*, with the La Jolla Symphony and an all-star cast of soloists, including Helga Davis, Peter Evans and UC San Diego luminaries, bassist Kyle Motl and drummer Kjell Nordeson. *Lonely Woman* isn't exactly dark, but it surely is discomfiting. Coleman spoke about working in a department store before he became the free jazz giant we know. On a break, he saw a rich woman who seemed to have all the material possessions one could hope for in life, yet had the most solitary expression on her face. This is the lonely woman, the one who had everything except life itself.

Finding "life itself" is our ultimate goal. And as elusive as that may feel in real life, it is a quest that music captures beautifully. Music is the natural medium for life-force. We hear life-force in the virtuosic acrobatics of Peter Evans as he plays Rand Steiger's music, and we hear it when Tobin Chodos translates Ornette Coleman's mid-century jazz tone poem to the orchestral medium. We hear it as Fauré guides us through his requiem towards the apotheosis of "In Paradisum," his last movement and our ultimate goal. And we can hear it most clearly of all if we dare to look unflinchingly at Courtney Bryan's tragic tableau. Finding life always means driving out darkness.

Steven Schick