

Conductor's Note

We continue with our season-long exploration of the twinned ideas of lineage and memory.

Memory flows down two related streams. The first is personal memory, which is usually what we as individuals mean by “a memory.” As I write these words just before Thanksgiving, I am awash in powerful personal memories of the Thanksgivings of my childhood: of the smell of my grandmother’s kitchen, of trips home to visit my parents when I was a student at the University of Iowa, of the first real cold-snap of the season. If I was really lucky, the lake (Clear Lake, where I grew up) would be frozen enough to skate on. Then we’d have mile after mile of new smooth ice with no snow or slushy spots to slow you down and enough wind to pick up a head of steam (at least in one direction!). Or more adventurously, I’d get on an ice boat—a low-slung single-person hull with so little friction between blades and ice that it was basically a sail-powered rocket ship. That was paradise!

Personal memory can be a source of connection with other people, but unless you also have fond memories of Thanksgiving ice boating, you’re probably already bored with my story.

A more powerful source of connection is communal memory, our collective societal recollection of important people and events. At its grandest, shared communal remembrance is at the root of religious ritual and at the core of patriotic fervor. It drives allegiances to sports teams and preferred vacation spots. Our sense of belonging—to one another, to a place, or to creed—is a kind of memory. Even, belief itself is impossible without communal memory. And, communal memory—since it is by definition widely shared—tends to amplify associated emotions of joy or grief; relief or anxiety.

A great piece of music plays simultaneously with both personal and communal memory. Take Handel’s masterpiece *Messiah* for example. Nearly everyone reading these words has some personal memory of *Messiah*. Maybe that was a moving concert performance or a community sing-along. For me it was a Christmas Eve drive down the length of California to San Diego with all of Brenda’s belongings packed in a U-Haul behind us. Threading the Grapevine, we had been talking of the momentous joining of our lives, when the drone of talk radio was interrupted by the immediate rush of joy of the “Hallelujah Chorus.” That was also paradise!

Yes, we all have personal memories of *Messiah*, but the full force of the piece is communal. This music is now several centuries old and tells a story that spans millennia. So, in a communal sense, when we listen to *Messiah* we are listening along with millions of other people—indeed an entire culture—who came before us.

On today’s concert we’ll hear *Messiah* in an infrequently-performed scoring by Mozart. It’s the same *Messiah* you know and love—in today’s program you’ll hear just Part 1, the “Christmas” portion of the piece, along with the ecstatic “Hallelujah Chorus.” Mozart’s orchestral colors, especially in vivid and lyrical woodwind writing, give the work a kind of classical-era sparkle.

Messiah is great music—pure and simple—and doesn’t need justification beyond that. But what I love about this program is the way this most traditional of music contextualizes the lesser-known works on the program. Perhaps this is why we tell familiar stories; we are rehearsing communal memory. And as one of our most familiar stories, *Messiah*, with its catechism of personal and heartening connections among people of all (or no) faiths, satisfies like few other pieces. It can also be a guide to us when we are dealing with the less familiar.

Perhaps we can apply the lessons of universal belonging—so evident in Handel—to the world premiere of Qingqing Wang’s *Between Clouds and Streams*. As I write these words, we have just begun to rehearse this new piece (Qingqing is this year’s Nee Commission recipient.) It’s a little early for observations from the conductor, but already I sense the deeply exploratory nature of this piece, as though the composer were unearthing her past in front of our ears. What will she decide to reveal to us and what to obscure? You’ll hear the mixture of new sounds and new techniques of conducting—using, at times, Butch Morris’s inventive hand signs called “conduction.” That’s pretty experimental, but there are also moments of sheer beauty and repose. In her music, Qingqing Wang is telling us a lot about how she sees and remembers the world.

And what about Florence Price’s *Violin Concerto No. 2*, played by our own concertmaster, the extraordinary David Buckley? (We’ll perform Price’s First Concerto next season with Peter Clarke.) Florence Price is a fabulous composer whom history nearly forgot. Perhaps it was because her lush and romantic compositions were out of fashion among the mid-century modernists, or that she didn’t have a publisher or famous conductor as an advocate. Alas, the sad and more probable reason was that an African-American woman with a powerful creative voice simply wasn’t welcome in the hallowed and privileged halls of classical music. Listen to this beautiful music and reflect on the fact that we nearly let it recede into the mists of obscurity. How close did we come? It is thanks to sheer luck that a couple discovered the manuscript in a ramshackle, abandoned house and sent it to the University of Arkansas where Price’s archives are maintained. The shocking fact is that Florence Price died in 1953 and this violin concerto received its first performance last April.

Sometimes a society is judged by what it is willing to forget.

So, as we celebrate the Season with *Messiah*, a piece of music that will never be forgotten, let us remember and celebrate other music, other inspirations. With any luck we will bequeath future generations communal musical memories of great richness and diversity! Steven Schick