

The opening ceremony of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.



Gold-Medal MUSIC

THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN PARIS ARE A
REMINDER OF CLASSICAL MUSIC'S
LONG-STANDING CEREMONIAL ROLE.

BY BRIAN WISE

WHEN THE PARIS Olympics open along the River Seine this July, classical music-minded viewers may be reminded of another opening ceremony, in 2008, when Lang Lang (Piano '02), sporting a glam-white suit, played amid a sea of green dancers in Beijing's Bird's Nest Stadium.

Others might flash back to Nagano 1998, when Seiji Ozawa conducted a sprawling performance of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, featuring choirs on five continents linked by satellite. Those with even longer memories might think of 1984 in Los Angeles, when Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was deliv-

ered by 84 pianists in turquoise tuxedos—shortly after a man flew into the arena on a jet pack.

While over-the-top orchestral grandeur has often been a staple of Olympic ceremonies—opening or closing—for decades, individual Olympic pieces seldom outlive the moment. Legions of TV viewers can hum along to John Williams' fanfares, but how many know Olympic anthems by Leonard Bernstein (Conducting '41), Richard Strauss, Philip Glass, or Michael Torke? The history is deeper and stranger than you might think.

Music as Olympic Contender

The father of the modern Olympics, a French aristocrat named Baron Pierre de Coubertin, envisioned art as the equal of sport in his Athenian ideal. At his insistence, there were arts competitions at the games, starting with the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, with prizes for music, painting, literature, sculpture, and architecture. Italy's now-forgotten Ricardo Barthelmy won the music gold that year with his *Triumphal Olympic March*. No silver or bronze medals were awarded.

In the era of musical avant-gardism, medal-winning pieces tended to be stylistically conservative, and prizes were not always handed out. At the 1924 Olympics in Paris, the 40-strong jury, which included Stravinsky and Ravel, decided that no one was worthy of a first prize. At the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, Czech composer Josef Suk clinched the top honor for his patriotic march, *Into a New Life*. Damning with faint praise, it won the silver medal.

The art competitions were dropped after 1948. But by then, music was becoming focal to the ceremonial events. The *Olympic Hymn* by Spiridion Samara (1863–1917) debuted at the inaugural games in Athens in 1896 and was made official in 1959. Richard

Strauss conducted 3,000 musicians in his *Olympische Hymne* for the notorious opening of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Though Strauss was no fan of either sports or the Nazis, he saw the event as an opportunity to raise his profile. The 1952 Olympics in Helsinki were bolstered by a re-arrangement of an early cantata by Jean Sibelius.

Bernstein, Glass, and Lots of Williams

Olympic commissions increasingly went to composers with lengthy film or theater music credits. Philip Glass composed *The Olympian* for the torch-lighting ceremony at the 1984 Los Angeles games, followed by *Orion* for the 2004 Athens Cultural Olympiad. Bernstein penned his *Olympic Hymn* not for the Olympic games, but for the 1981 meeting of the International Olympic Congress in Baden-Baden, Germany. The text, by German writer Günter Kunert, has the line, “fight as friends, not as foes,” a possible nod to the recently boycotted Moscow games of 1980.

In modern times, John Williams has defined the heroic Olympic aesthetic over four separate fanfares. Jun-Ching Lin

(Violin '85) and Christina Smith (Flute '91), both members of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, recall the thrill of premiering Williams' *Summon the Heroes* at the opening ceremony of the 1996 Atlanta Games. “I was in my twenties and fairly new to the orchestra,” says Ms. Smith, who notes that the ASO musicians mimed the performance to their pre-recorded track, a standard practice for stadium events. “It was like my fifth season, and I was just totally starstruck. It was like being with a rock star.”

Mr. Lin recalls playing on cheap, rented instruments (it rained) and some frantic moments during Muhammed Ali's iconic torch lighting, when it seemed as if the cauldron wouldn't ignite. Most of all, he remembers the crowd reception. “You never experience 80 or 90,000 people cheering for you when you come out on stage,” he says. “I guess that's what Taylor Swift gets to experience all the time, but for classical musicians, that doesn't usually happen. And I remember the event took forever. It was like, three or four hours long!”

In 1996, the ASO also performed

Michael Torke's *Javelin*, which has since been recorded twice, and Jessye Norman soared in the *Olympic Anthem*, part of a growing diva tradition (Montserrat Caballé set the bar in her collaboration with Freddie Mercury on “Barcelona,” broadcast at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics).

By 2002 in Salt Lake City, production values were improving, classical crossover was in full swing (Yo-Yo Ma performed with Sting), and the Utah Symphony introduced a new Williams piece, *Call of the Champions*. Associate principal flute Lisa Byrnes (Flute '89) donned an official sweater over her down coat as February temperatures hovered at 10 degrees Fahrenheit. “It was so cold that the metal instruments were on the verge of sticking to our chins,” she recalls, noting that both the orchestra and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir mimed to pre-recorded tracks.

“People from all over the world were downtown. I remember showing up for rehearsal one morning, and there was a huge group of people doing tai chi in the courtyard in front of the hall. That was kind of a new thing for Salt Lake City to have people from all around the world there.”

Organizers in Paris have revealed few details on this summer's musical lineup, but they inherit a recent classical tradition that has veered towards the irreverent, be it the London 2012 Games, where the London Symphony Orchestra played the *Chariots of Fire* theme with Mr. Bean on keyboards, or the 2014 Sochi Olympics, which closed with pianist Denis Matsuev playing Rachmaninoff while performers pushed 62 grand pianos around the stadium floor in a ballet sequence.

Though hosting nations may find receptive ears with homegrown pop or folk music sounds, classical music can still provide the requisite solemnity and spectacle while cutting across barriers—language and otherwise. Reflecting in late 2008 on his Olympic moment, Lang Lang told London's *Daily Telegraph*, “I was afraid my part would be cut out because [the ceremony] was so focused on Chinese instruments and Chinese culture. Thank God it was still in. I loved it. Especially the piano is in the middle of the Bird's Nest. Unbelievable. I still get excited just to talk about that.”



John Williams conducts the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra at the 1996 Summer Olympics.