

Violin at the Opera

Thursday, October 5 – 8 pm

Robert Bernhardt, conductor

Alexandre Da Costa, violin

ESTACIO

King Arthur Suite: Dances from the Ballet King Arthur's Camelot (17')*

King Arthur and Merlin: Allegro maestoso

Guinevere and Her Entourage: Vivo, playfully

Lancelot, and Induction to the Knights of the Round Table: Allegro, virile

Picnic Bacchanale: Somewhat sultry

TCHAIKOVSKY

Eugene Onegin: Lensky's Aria (arr. Auer / orch. Chiasson) (6')*

R. STRAUSS

Der Rosenkavalier: Waltz (arr. Singer / orch. Chiasson) (8')*

GOUNOD

Faust: Waltz (arr. Dragon) (5')*

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

WAGNER

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg: Prelude (10')*

WAGNER

Tannhäuser: Romance (arr. Wilhelmj / orch. Chiasson) (6')*

WAGNER

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg: Preislied (arr. Wilhelmj / orch. Chiasson) (7')*

SARASATE

Fantasy on Bizet's *Carmen*, Op.25: Aragonaise and Habañera (5')*

CHIASSON

Finale: *Stradivari all'Opera* (after Vitali) (10')*

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

All the music on tonight's program originated on the stage and, with the exception of the opening ballet suite, originated on the operatic stage. Yet not a word will be sung. Instead, the singing role will be taken on by the violin of Alexandre Da Costa, in a program inspired by his recent Sony Classical recording, *Stradivarius at the Opera*.

But, ballet first. The much beloved tale of King Arthur has enjoyed life in novels, movies, television, plays, video games, a musical, but not much on the ballet stage. In 2012, the Cincinnati Ballet approached composer **John Estacio** (b. 1966) to create a score for a full length ballet. With a story adapted by Eda Holmes, *King Arthur's Camelot* tells the story of the young Arthur who, upon pulling out the sword from the stone, becomes king and grows up to marry his beloved Guinevere and form the benevolent Knights of the Round Table. The ballet was first performed February 13, 2014 in Cincinnati, and was such a success, it was remounted this past February. The ESO premiered the suite in June 2016.

The suite focuses on the heroes of the story. It is in four movements, designed to create a logically constructed work for the concert hall, rather than attempt to "miniaturize" the story of the ballet. The titles of the first two movements are self-explanatory. In the third movement, the bold and brash Lancelot arrives unannounced at the wedding of Guinevere and Arthur and creates a ruckus. Arthur, impressed by the demeanour of the young man, inducts him into the Knights of the Round Table; the movement concludes with Arthur sweeping his new wife into his arms and walking off into the starry evening. In the final movement, the knights and the ladies of the court go for a picnic prior to a jousting match; food, libation, fun, and frivolity.

Nearly every great soloist is drawn to his or her solo instrument because of its "singing" quality, its ability, for them, to elicit the dramatic range and musical prowess of the human voice. So it's no surprise that the famous tunes from operas have proven fertile ground for transcriptions to the many varied and diverse instruments available to the skilled player. On *Stradivarius at the Opera*, Mr. Da Costa presents transcriptions created for him by Frédéric Chiasson.

Throughout his career, **Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840-1893) sought success with opera. Yet it proved elusive, and even today, only *Eugene Onegin* is performed steadily. But he wrote, or began, many others. *Onegin*, which premiered in 1879, was based on the verse novel by Pushkin – the story of a self-centred nobleman who realizes too late in life the foolish and heartless choices he has made and the consequences with which he must live. Lensky is a poet, and *Onegin's* friend, who nevertheless finds himself in a duel with *Onegin* in Act II. Lensky's famous aria is his farewell to life.

Early in his career, **Richard Strauss** (1864-1949) wrote operas that were on the very cutting edge of modernity and daring. He mellowed as he got older, and among his more mature stage works was the charming and deliberately anachronistic *Der Rosenkavalier*, first performed in 1911, and based in part

on a Molière comedy. It has been a success from its premiere, and is everywhere filled with music less from the 20th century than from ages past. Waltzes are a common feature (it's worth noting that, despite his last name, Richard Strauss was unrelated to the Waltz King, Johann Strauss Jr.), and tonight's excerpt gives the solo violin a spotlight amid the splendour of Strauss' rich music.

A sumptuous dance scene was considered de rigeur in grand French opera of the 19th century, and **Charles Gounod** (1818-1893) supplied several grand operas, none more famous than his 1859 version of the **Faust** legend. As with Strauss (above), Gounod features a waltz – in a climactic Act II scene where Méphistophélès has roused a group of villagers in a drunken frenzy – the dance is part of their revelry.

There is no doubt of the place in musical posterity belonging to **Richard Wagner** (1813-1883). His operas (he actually preferred the term “music dramas”) broke with established musical tradition in many ways, and helped usher in music of the 20th century. The myths and legends of northern Europe (Germany in particular) were paramount in importance to him, as was the idea of redemption through true art, and true love. Excerpts from three Wagner works are next on our program.

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (“The Master-Singer of Nuremberg”), premiered in 1868, was one of Wagner's few comic operas; yet it contains some of his most profound observations on the importance of music. A full performance of it lasts some four and a half hours, so it's probably no surprise that even its Prelude is a good ten minutes long. Contained within its length, however, are some of the work's splendid themes, including the love theme, and that of the “Prize Song,” which will be sung in the opera by Walther, the hero, as the means for winning the love, and the hand, of Eva, the heroine.

That “Prize Song,” or Preislied, figures into the beautiful arrangement for violin and orchestra prepared for Mr. Da Costa by Frédéric Chiasson and Auguste Wilhelmj, which will be heard following another Wagner theme. The title character of his opera **Tannhäuser** was similar to Walther, the “master singer” of Die Meistersinger. Tannhäuser, however, is a serious drama, again focusing on love's capacity to redeem a lost soul. This work was first performed in 1845, but, unsatisfied with it, Wagner continued to make revisions which he never fully completed before his death nearly 40 years later. The Romance which makes up tonight's music deals with the love of Tannhäuser for the pure Elizabeth – an ideal of love which his life of debauchery has left unattainable.

As Mr. Da Costa has done with his recording *Stradivarius at the Opera*, so in the 19th century did one of history's great violinists turn to opera for a showcase of his own talent. **Pablo de Sarasate** (1844-1908) was one of the greatest violinists who ever lived, and during his career, many composers wrote works specifically for his unique gifts. Sarasate, too, composed for himself, and his most famous work was a free fantasy based on many of the popular tunes from Georges Bizet's *Carmen*. Only a few short weeks after his death, Bizet's last work became world-renowned and celebrated, its many Spanish-inspired melodies and dance forms among the most popular of the time. To these, Sarasate added his own dashing violinistic fireworks, creating his **Fantasy on Bizet's Carmen** in 1882 for violin and piano. He orchestrated the work shortly after. We'll hear the Aragonaise and the Habañera tonight.

Taking as its starting point an obscure Chaconne by **Tomaso Antonio Vitali** (1663-1745), our concert concludes with a fantasia for which arranger Frédéric Chiasson has given the Italian title of Alexandre Da Costa's album. ***Stradivari all'Opera*** begins dreamily, the violin soaring over the gentle string accompaniment. A set of increasingly detailed and elaborate variations on the Vitali theme, the piece presents a series of challenging hurdles for the performer while never losing its musical centre.

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