

Reno Chamber Orchestra
Program Notes for
The Stories We Tell
November 18 & 19, 2023

Kevin Lau

Born: 1982, Hong Kong

One of Canada's most versatile and sought-after young composers, Kevin Lau has been commissioned by some of Canada's most prominent artists and ensembles, and his work has been performed internationally in the USA, France, Denmark, Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic. A prolific composer of orchestral, chamber, ballet, opera, and film music, he served as Affiliate Composer of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra from 2012-2015; to date, he has produced seven works for the TSO. Shortly after, he was commissioned to write two ballets with choreographer Guillaume Cote: a full-length ballet (*Le Petit Prince*) for the National Ballet of Canada and a half hour ballet (*Dark Angels*) for the National Arts Centre Orchestra. He served as composer-in-residence for the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra from 2021-2023.

Artemis

Composed: 2009

Duration: 10 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, percussion, harp, strings

Kevin Lau has written the following, which we include here with his permission, on *Artemis*:

"Over the shadowy hills and wind-blown peaks of the mountains, she leads the hunt, delighting in drawing her bow, all of gold, and shooting her deadly shafts. The hilltops are shaken by terror, and the dark of the woods resounds with the terrified screaming of beasts; the earth and the fish-laden ocean tremble in fear at her coming. She roves over all, fearless-hearted, slaying all races of creatures. But when the huntress, delighter in arrows, has sated her longing, rejoicing in heart, she loosens the string of her well-curved bow, and returns to the mighty palace of Phoebus Apollo, her brother, in the fertile country of Delphi, to join with the Muses and Graces in treading the maze of the dance..."

Such is Homer's description of Artemis, daughter of Zeus, the virgin goddess of wildlife. A deadly huntress who killed without mercy, striking down any who transgressed her law with her gold-tipped arrows, she was also a lover of animals, of music and dance, and a symbol of fertility. In Greek mythology, she was the quintessential "untamed" woman: beautiful, alluring, but vengeful and unspeakably dangerous. Although men desired her, she kept her chastity, as anyone foolish enough to admire her too closely usually met with an untimely end.

Artemis is a musical portrait of the Greek goddess in the manner of Gustav Holst's symphonic suite *The Planets*, whose seven movements are based on the Greek deities' Roman counterparts. The movement "Mars, the Bringer of War" (Ares to the Greeks) was particularly influential in the conception of this piece. There are two places in *Artemis* which overtly reference the martial rhythms and harmonic progressions of "Mars." At the same time, I sought to emphasize qualities which I thought would befit a more feminine warrior: speed and swiftness, lightness, agility. The "masculine" lower brass contingent is here replaced by a small but fierce percussion battery.

Artemis is divided into three sections which follow one another without pause. The first, "The Hunt," is a tempestuous depiction of the goddess as she rains destruction upon her victims. Amidst the frenzy of percussion which launches the work, the horns sound a war-call in their lowest registers, signaling the goddess's approach. The closing fugue is an ode to the goddess's classical qualities – beauty, sophistication, and deadly grace.

The title of the second section ("In the Pale Moonlight") refers to Artemis's designation as the Goddess of the Moon (her twin brother, Apollo, is sometimes referred to as the Sun God). Their mother was persecuted by Zeus's wife, Hera, who forbade her to give birth on any land that saw the light of day. So Apollo and Artemis were born on two floating islands, which at times rose above the surface of the sea, and at times dipped beneath it. The music is a meditation on the goddess's place of origin and her sacred woodlands, where only the "pure of heart" may enter.

Although the title of the third section, "Dance of Artemis," is suggestive of the goddess's lighter, more life-affirming qualities, it is in truth nearly as aggressive as the hunt itself. Only by the end do we realize that the violence has been transfigured into a kind of war dance, both celebratory and cruel. Swirling swings give way to a majestic statement of the "Artemis Theme," at last revealed in its fullest form.

Caroline Shaw

Born: August 1, 1982, Greenville, North Carolina

An acclaimed composer, singer, violinist, and producer, Caroline Shaw was the youngest-ever winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Music, having received the award in 2013, at the age of thirty, for her *Partita for 8 Voices*. She has also won multiple Grammy Awards, and an honorary doctorate from Yale University. Shaw received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in violin performance from Rice and Yale, respectively. Along with her busy composing schedule, she still performs regularly with the vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble, and a variety of other groups. Her compositions, numbering over one hundred in the last decade, have been commissioned and performed by, among many others, Yo Yo Ma, Renée Fleming, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, So Percussion, the Brentano and Aizuri String Quartets, Brooklyn Rider, Ars Nova Copenhagen, and the Brooklyn Youth Chorus. Her music has been featured in a number of films, television programs, and stage productions. She has collaborated with artists like Kanye West and Beyoncé, and appeared in the series *Mozart in the Jungle*.

The Mountain that Loved a Bird

Composed: 2017

Duration: 18 minutes

Instrumentation: narrator, flute/piccolo, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, horn, trombone, tuba, glockenspiel, wood blocks, bass drum, strings

Alice McLerran (1933-2019) worked for several years as an anthropologist in Ecuador, then taught at the State University of New York, Cortland. She also studied at the Harvard School of Public Health, and did research at Massachusetts Mental Hospital. After marrying physicist Larry McLerran in 1976, she traveled with him to various teaching jobs across the United States. During those travels, McLerran started writing children's books, eventually publishing about a dozen of them. Her first, *The Mountain that Loved a Bird*, was published in 1985. It became very popular, and has been translated into over twenty languages.

When Carnegie Hall offered Caroline Shaw the commission of a new musical work based on a children's book, she turned to the internet for suggestions. She found her way to *The Mountain that Loved a Bird*, and Shaw had several conversations with McLerran about the new piece, which was premiered at Carnegie Hall on October 14, 2017, with John Lithgow as narrator and Edwin Outwater conducting the Orchestra of St. Luke's. Shaw's score carries this dedication: "For all young, old, and future Joys & Mountains. Take good care of each other."

As the narrator tells of a lonely mountain in the desert, the tolling of a bell and soft horn calls are heard, joined by swirling strings. A bird named Joy appears. The mountain would love for the bird to stay. Although Joy is pleased by the mountain's offer, there is no food or drink there. She can only visit in the spring, and then only for a short number of hours. But Joy promises that she, and all her offspring over the generations, will visit every year and sing for the mountain. Joy's beautiful song is heard from the flute, soon spreading to the other instruments and gaining power.

After one hundred years of increasing sadness at Joy's annual departures, the mountain's heart breaks, and there is a sudden eruption. A flood of tears comes welling forth, which in time becomes an actual stream. In subsequent years, Joy continues to visit, but now bringing a seed each year. Over time the seeds sprout roots, grow shoots, and eventually turn into trees. It takes some time, but the mountain comes to notice these important changes, and its tears become tears of happiness. The mountain and the desert around it are now green and fertile, the lushness extending for miles. One year Joy appears, this time with a twig rather than a seed. She goes to the first tree that had taken root on the mountain, finally ready to build a nest and stay for good, as the music grows in power to its final climax.

Gioacchino Rossini

Born: February 29, 1792, Pesaro, Italy

Died: November 13, 1868, Paris, France

The operas of Gioacchino Rossini remain among the most beloved in the repertoire. Rossini received his earliest musical training from his musician parents. Soon after graduating from

the Liceo Musicale in Bologna he wrote his first complete opera, and by the age of twenty, works like *L'italiana in Algeri* (The Italian Woman in Algiers) had made him Italy's most famous composer. From 1815 to 1822 he was under contract to compose for opera houses in Naples. He wrote an amazing nineteen operas in those years for Naples and other Italian opera houses, including *Otello*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville) and *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella). Soon after completing a tour of Europe in 1822, he settled in Paris for five years, where he wrote his last opera, *Guillaume Tell* (William Tell). He retired from opera composition a wealthy man at age 37, having produced 39 operas. In his remaining decades of relative seclusion, he continued to compose sacred works, songs, piano miniatures, and chamber pieces dubbed "sins of my old age."

Selections from *La Cenerentola*

Composed: 1816-17

Duration: 37 minutes

Instrumentation: voices, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone, timpani, percussion, strings

Rossini was only 25 years old when *La Cenerentola* was given its premiere in Rome on January 25, 1817. But he was already a veteran in the opera world, having had nineteen operas performed, and he and his music were much in demand all over Europe. *La Cenerentola*, subtitled "ossia La bontà in trionfo" (or Goodness Triumphant), was based on the famous story of Cinderella as originally told by Charles Perrault in his story of 1697, *Cendrillon*. As was the case with so many of Rossini's operas, *La Cenerentola* was written quickly. The libretto, by Rossini's frequent collaborator Jacopo Ferretti, was written in 22 days, and Rossini completed his music in just 24 days. Although Ferretti had some doubts about what they'd created, Rossini had none, predicting that "the impresarios will fight for staging it, as well as the prima donnas for being able to sing it." Rossini proved to be correct, and *La Cenerentola* was, along with *The Barber of Seville*, his most popular opera throughout the nineteenth century, and remains among his most-performed today.

Overture

As he often did, Rossini actually borrowed his overture to *La Cenerentola* from an earlier work, in this case the 1816 opera *La gazzetta*. A lyrical opening in the low strings is contrasted with interjected brass fanfares and woodwind figures. Rushing strings introduce a note of tension before sprightly faster music begins. Then the clarinet introduces a new theme. The strings take up another figure, which repeats several times, getting louder with each repetition. This "Rossini crescendo" section is the only portion of the overture that turns up later in the opera, when it is used in a brilliant ensemble near the end of Act I. The faster melodies parade past again, varied in orchestration this time. The crescendo section returns before a fast paced coda brings the work to an exciting close.

"Un soave no so che" (Angelina, Ramino)

Don Ramino, the Prince of Salerno, has arrived at the home of Don Magnifico, the stepfather of Angelina, or La Cenerentola. He is in disguise as a valet, hoping to find a worthy bride among the young women of the household, or perhaps later at a ball he will be holding. Angelina, serving as a maid in her own home, enters, and is surprised by Ramino's presence.

Ramino sings of “un soave no so che,” the “unknown sweetness” that sparkles in her eyes, and they both wonder why their hearts are beating so. In music that moves easily from playfulness to tenderness, Ramino wonders who she might be. Angelina, confused, shares some of her troubled background. Ramino is only further enchanted. By the end of the scene, they are thoroughly taken with one another.

Storm

Back at the home of Don Magnifico in Act II, a storm bursts forth from the orchestra, with swirling strings and dramatic outbursts from the timpani and brass. Rossini had a fondness for storm music – examples can also be found in his operas *William Tell* and *The Barber of Seville*.

“Si ritrovarla io guiro” (Ramiro)

Angelina and Ramino have been separated, but Ramino excitedly exclaims that, whatever the circumstances, “Si ritrovarla io guiro,” “I will find her again! I swear it!” The music slows and becomes tender as he sings of his need for courage, and his desire to “hold you close to my heart.” He will seek her out, using the bracelet she had given him (rather than the glass slipper in many versions of the story) to identify her. As the music charges forward, he sings that love must guide him amid “sweet hope and bitter despair.”

“Nacqui all’affanno ... Non più mesta” (Angelina)

In this, the opera's closing aria, Angelina says goodbye to her stepfather and stepsisters, having finally reunited with Don Ramino. “Nacqui all’affanno e al pianto” – “I was born into worry and weeping.” She suffered quietly until she found her life changed, “swift as a flash of lightning.” Despite her new situation, though, she will remain a good “daughter, sister, friend.” With floridly-decorated music that culminates in one of the famous “Rossini crescendos,” she expresses her joy, singing that she can now abandon her sad songs and quiet suffering – they were just “a dream” compared to her beautiful new life. And they live happily ever after...