

John Harbison (b.1938)

Symphony No. 5 for Baritone, Mezzo-soprano, and Orchestra (2008)

Only previous performances: April 17-18, 2008, Symphony Hall, Boston, Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine cond.; Nathan Gunn, baritone; Kate Lindsey, mezzo-soprano. Harbison wrote the Symphony No. 5 on commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, Music Director, through the generous support of Catherine and Paul Buitenwieser. The prominent electric guitar part in this performance is played by Michael Gandolfi.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is the most musical of classical myths: Orpheus' songs with his lyre could charm the very stones and trees, although it wasn't enough to keep the nymph Eurydice from a deadly serpent's bite on their wedding day. Nor was it enough, in the end, to keep the singer himself from being torn limb from limb by frenzied Bacchantes. But what concerns us, mostly, is what happens in between: Orpheus's descent into the underworld, heartbroken, to try to reclaim his lover. The conditions were that Orpheus make no attempt to speak to Eurydice on their way out of the underworld, nor to glance behind him to make sure she was still there. Impatience, or distrust, turned Orpheus' head just as the sun became visible again, and he lost Eurydice for good.

It's this story that is the narrative spine of Czesław Miłosz's "Orpheus and Eurydice," the poem that John Harbison set for baritone and orchestra as the first two movements of his Symphony No. 5. Miłosz wrote the poem, in Polish, in 2003 in reaction to the death of his wife; Harbison employs its English translation, which is by Miłosz and Robert Haas. Eurydice's voice, one rarely heard in literature, is present in Louis Glück's "Relic," set for mezzo-soprano in the third movement. Baritone and mezzo-soprano come together for the fourth movement, a setting of one of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* in English translation by Stephen Mitchell.

Harbison's Fifth began as a purely orchestral symphony, like his previous four in the genre. His Symphony No. 1 was a BSO centennial commission, premiered by Seiji Ozawa and the orchestra in March 1984 and reprised the following summer with Harbison himself conducting. He has had the Boston Symphony sound in his ear since he was a student at Harvard; and it was the BSO that introduced his first big orchestral work, *Di-otima*, in 1977 (written on a Koussevitzky Foundation commission). The BSO has commissioned or co-commissioned several others of the composer's big pieces of recent years, including his Cello Concerto, written for Yo-Yo Ma and co-commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; his Requiem for soloists, chorus, and orchestra (given its Boston and New York premieres in March 2003 with Bernard Haitink conducting), the smaller *Darkbloom: Overture for an imagined opera*, commissioned for James Levine's first season as music director, and the Bass Viol Concerto, a BSO 125th Anniversary Commission and a co-commission with several other orchestras.

Harbison and Levine began discussing the possibility of a new symphony around the time of the *Darkbloom* premiere three years ago. It was only after the composer had conceived and made sketches that Levine suggested (even at this relatively late stage) that voice might be added. Levine had previously led the premiere of the composer's opera *The Great Gatsby* at the Metropolitan Opera in 1999 and felt particular sympathy with Harbison's writing for voice. Harbison warmed to the conductor's suggestion, and, having already established the work's central idea, cast around for a poem that would help embody its theme of loss and the aftermath of loss.

The text might well not have been about Orpheus at all, but when Harbison came across Czesław Miłosz's poem in a magazine, it read as a clear complement to his already well-formed symphonic ideas, and he had previously set the Nobel Prize-winning poet's work in his orchestral song cycle *Miłosz Songs* (2006). Miłosz's "Orpheus and Eurydice," the text of the first two movements, is the main part of the piece, but it was only during his work on that setting that Harbison began to feel it fell short of what he had intended for his symphony. His choice of Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Louise Glück's "Relic," from a larger Orpheus cycle called *Vita Nova*, for the third movement offered a counter to Miłosz's poem, but also required a different physical voice, a mezzo-soprano. Finally he decided on an English translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Sonnet to Orpheus" II, 13 for the fourth movement, which enabled him to reconcile the two earlier perspectives both musically and thematically. The third and fourth movements feel like realigning epilogues, simultaneously clarifying and broadening the matter of the first two movements.

In the first movement the sections are “The death of Orpheus”; “At the entrance to Hades”; “He remembered her words”; “In a labyrinth.” In the second: “He sang the brightness...”; “But there were conditions”; “It happened as he expected.” The movement break is within the flow of the music but corresponds to a sudden change in sonority. Near the end of the first movement, when Orpheus encounters Persephone, Hades’ queen, electric guitar evokes Orpheus’s “nine-stringed lyre,” chosen by Harbison to match Miłosz’s strange little modern details. The poem’s description of Orpheus’s song, “He sang the brightness,” begins the second movement, accompanied by a sheen of overlapping triadic arpeggios in guitar, harp, piano, and mallet percussion.

In the third movement, “Where would I be without my sorrow,” we hear a new voice, that of the mezzo-soprano/Eurydice in the words of Louise Glück’s “Relic.” In contrast to the Miłosz setting, this suggested a much more autonomous approach, and a character that remains mostly consistent throughout. The finale, “Be ahead of all parting,” is similarly a self-contained song, but now a duet, intertwining the voices as Orpheus and Eurydice are inextricable in our consciousness. The orchestra continues in a new direction long after the voices stop.

ROBERT KIRZINGER

Robert Kirzinger is Publications Associate of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

JOHN HARBISON’S NOTE FROM THE SCORE OF HIS SYMPHONY NO. 5 IS REPRINTED HERE:

As an audience member I’ve noticed that listeners for a piece with words fall into three groups: (1) those who follow the text as the music is being performed; (2) those who read the text over, before or after the performance, with varying degrees of attention, and (3) those who pay no close attention to the text at any point, but listen only “symphonically,” that is, to the pattern of sound.

Those in the last group, though the ones for whom I have the least understanding, are probably the ones best qualified to decide whether this piece is, indeed, a Symphony. Every piece with singers and instruments should be coherent as a lucid sequence of sounds. These sounds, without reference to their verbal origins, aspired to a significant musical shape, something *symphonic*.

This piece existed, in imagination, as an orchestral meditation on loss, before the welcome suggestion from James Levine that it might contain music for voice. Three poems make more explicit the musical “theme.”

Tellers of mythic stories are especially free to tell, on the frame of a known “plot,” their own stories. What I loved about Miłosz’s narrative was how truly *Miłosz* it is—the habitual glosses and asides, his tough sensuous survival instinct, his sudden bolts of lyricism.

Miłosz’s ending winningly evades the sober consequences suggested in my orchestral introduction. I felt his ending required an answer, a strong rejoinder. Louise Glück’s “Relic” is the counterforce. Song.

Then perhaps a Summation is possible. Rilke’s poem can be read and translated many ways. That quality allows the composer to set the tone. Stephen Mitchell’s graceful rendering gives the singers clear phrases to sing. On certain days I “thought” the poem this way:

Be in front of every Farewell as if
it was already past, like the winter just passing now.
Because among winters comes one so finally Winter
that only by out-wintering it can your heart endure.
Be forever dead in Euridice—rise singing,
praising, rise back into your pure enterprise.
Here amid that which disappears, be, in the realm of negation,
be a sounding glass that shattered as it sounded.
Be—and still know at the same time the source of non-being—
the endless basis of your inner “swing”
so that this one time you can completely seize it.
To all that is worn out, to the mute and muted
creatures of nature’s totality, the unexpressible sum,
add yourself, rejoicing, and call it complete.

JOHN HARBISON

(Rilke translation by John Harbison)

JOHN HARBISON

Symphony No. 5 for Baritone, Mezzo-soprano, and Orchestra (2008),
on texts of Czesław Miłosz, Louise Glück, and Rainer Maria Rilke

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

Standing on flagstones of the sidewalk at the entrance to Hades
Orpheus hunched in a gust of wind
That tore at his coat, rolled past in waves of fog,
Tossed the leaves of trees. The headlights of cars
Flared and dimmed in each succeeding wave.

He stopped at the glass-panelled door, uncertain
Whether he was strong enough for that ultimate trial.

He remembered her words: "You are a good man."
He did not quite believe it. Lyric poets
Usually have—as he knew—cold hearts.
It is like a medical condition. Perfection in art
Is given in exchange for such an affliction.

Only her love warmed him, humanized him.
When he was with her, he thought differently about himself.
He could not fail her now, when she was dead.

He pushed open the door and found himself walking in a labyrinth,
Corridors, elevators. The livid light was not light but the dark of the earth.
Electronic dogs passed him noiselessly.
He descended many floors, a hundred, three hundred, down.

He was cold, aware that he was Nowhere.
Under thousands of frozen centuries,
On an ashy trace where generations had moldered,
In a kingdom that seemed to have no bottom and no end.

Thronging shadows surrounded him.
He recognized some of the faces.
He felt the rhythm of his blood.
He felt strongly his life with its guilt
And he was afraid to meet those to whom he had done harm.
But they had lost the ability to remember
And gave him only a glance, indifferent to all that.

For his defense he had a nine-stringed lyre.
He carried in it the music of the earth, against the abyss
That buries all of sound in silence.
He submitted to the music, yielded
To the dictation of a song, listening with rapt attention,
Became, like his lyre, its instrument.

Thus he arrived at the palace of the rulers of that land.
Persephone, in her garden of withered pear and apple trees,
Black, with naked branches and verrucose twigs,
Listened from the funereal amethyst of her throne.

He sang the brightness of mornings and green rivers,
He sang of smoking water in the rose-colored daybreaks,
Of colors: cinnabar, carmine, burnt sienna, blue,
Of the delight of swimming in the sea under marble cliffs,
Of feasting on a terrace above the tumult of a fishing port,
Of the tastes of wine, olive oil, almonds, mustard, salt,
Of the flight of the swallow, the falcon,
Of a dignified flock of pelicans above a bay,
Of the scent of an armful of lilacs in summer rain,
Of his having composed his words always against death
And of having made no rhyme in praise of nothingness.

I don't know—said the goddess—whether you loved her or not.
Yet you have come here to rescue her.
She will be returned to you. But there are conditions:
You are not permitted to speak to her, or on the journey back
To turn your head, even once, to assure yourself that she is behind you.

And so Hermes brought forth Eurydice.
Her face no longer hers, utterly gray,
Her eyelids lowered, beneath the shade of her lashes.
She stepped rigidly, directed by the hand
Of her guide. Orpheus wanted so much
To call her name, to wake her from that sleep.
But he refrained, for he had accepted the conditions.

And so they set out. He first, and then, not right away,
The slap of the god's sandals and the light patter
Of her feet fettered by her robe, as if by a shroud.
A steep climbing path phosphorized
Out of darkness like the walls of a tunnel.
He would stop and listen. But then
They stopped, too, and the echo faded.
And when he began to walk the double tapping commenced again.
Sometimes it seemed closer, sometimes more distant.
Under his faith a doubt sprang up
And entwined him like cold bindweed.
Unable to weep, he wept at the loss
Of the human hope for the resurrection of the dead,
Because he was, now, like every other mortal.
His lyre was silent, yet he dreamed, defenseless.
He knew he must have faith and he could not have faith.
And so he would persist for a very long time,
Counting his steps in a half-wakeful torpor.

Day was breaking. Shapes of rock loomed up
Under the luminous eye of the exit from the underground.
It happened as he expected. He turned his head

And behind him on the path was no one.

Sun. And sky. And in the sky white clouds.
Only now everything cried to him: Eurydice!
How will I live without you, my consoling one!
But there was a fragrant scent of herbs, the low humming of bees,
And he fell asleep with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth.

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

Translated, from the Polish, by the author and Robert Haas
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RELIC

Where would I be without my sorrow,
sorrow of my beloved's making,
without some sign of him, this song
of all gifts the most lasting?

How would you like to die
while Orpheus was singing?
A long death: all the way to Dis
I heard him

Torment of earth
Torment of mortal passion—

I think sometimes
too much is asked of us;
I think sometimes
our consolations are the costliest thing.

All the way to Dis
I heard my husband singing,
much as you now hear me.
Perhaps it was better that way,
my love fresh in my head
even at the moment of death.

Not the first response—
that was terror—

but the last.

LOUISE GLÜCK

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SONNETS TO ORPHEUS, II, 13

Sei allem Abschied voran, als wäre
er hinter
dir, wie der Winter, der
eben geht.

Be ahead of all parting, as though it
already were
behind you, like the winter that has just
gone by.

Denn unter Wintern ist einer so
endlos Winter,
daß, überwinternd, dein Herz
überhaupt übersteht.

Sei immer tot in Eurydike—,
singender steige,
preisender steige zurück in den
reinen Bezug.
Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im
Reiche der Neige,
sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im
Klang schon zerschlug.

Sei—und wisse zugleich des
Nicht-Seins Bedingung,
den unendlichen Grund deiner
innigen Schwingung,
daß du sie völlig vollziehst dieses
einzigste Mal.

Zu dem gebrauchten sowohl, wie zum
dampfen und stummen
Vorat der vollen Natur, den
unsäglichen Summen,
zähle dich jubelnd hinzu und
vernichte die Zahl.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

For among these winters there is one so
endlessly winter
that only by wintering through it will your
heart survive.

Be forever dead in Eurydice—more gladly
arise
into the seamless life proclaimed in your
song.
Here, in the realm of decline, among
momentary days,
be the crystal cup that shattered even as
it rang.

Be—and yet know the great void where
all things begin,
the infinite source of our
inmost vibration,
so that, this once, you may give it your
perfect assent.

To all that is used-up, and to all the
muffled and dumb
creatures in the world's full reserve, the
unsayable sums,
joyfully add yourself, and cancel the count.

TRANSLATED BY STEPHEN MITCHELL

“The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke” (Vintage/Random House: 1992)
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