

André Previn

“Owls”

ANDRÉ PREVIN was born in Berlin on April 6, 1930 (not 1929 as given in numerous reference books) and lives in New York. “Owls,” which receives its world premiere performances in these concerts, is the product of a commission extended to Mr. Previn in the fall of 2007 by BSO Artistic Administrator Anthony Fogg on behalf of the orchestra and its music director, James Levine, with support from the New Works Fund established by the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The intent of the commission was to recognize Mr. Previn’s longstanding relationship with the BSO, while at the same time providing the opening work for his concerts here this week. The short score—which is to say, the music of the piece but not the details of the instrumentation—was completed by January 2008 and the full score not long after that, while the composer was in the final stages of completing his new opera, “Brief Encounter” (to be premiered by Houston Grand Opera in April 2009).

THE SCORE OF “OWLS” calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets in B-flat, bass clarinet, four horns, two trumpets, timpani, bass drum, celesta, harp, and strings. The duration of “Owls” is about fifteen minutes.

“One of the truly unusual careers in music” is how one writer has summed up André Previn’s amazingly versatile and wide-ranging list of credits. Even beyond his cumulative experience as conductor, composer, and pianist in the realms of orchestral music, chamber music, and jazz, his current range of activities continues to match or exceed that of any musician before the public today. At the same time, his current standing in the musical world—based particularly on the achievements of the past several decades—represents a logical extension and culmination of his earlier work, his previous other “lives” (as it were) lived to varying degrees simultaneously, and all reflective of his multi-faceted musical talents and inclinations—including his work on more than forty films as composer, arranger, and orchestrator in the Hollywood film studios between 1949 and 1973; his work with Alan Jay Lerner on the 1969 Broadway musical *Coco* (inspired by the life of fashion designer Coco Chanel and starring Katharine Hepburn); his 1974 collaboration with Johnny Mercer on the musical *The Good Companions*, which starred John Mills and Judi Dench in London’s West End; his music-theater collaboration with Tom Stoppard, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour*, commissioned by Queen Elizabeth II for her Silver Jubilee and premiered in 1976, with Patrick Stewart as the lead, by the Royal Shakespeare Company and London Symphony Orchestra; and a series of concert works in recent decades that have resulted from ongoing collaborations with many of the world’s foremost artists and ensembles (including, among others, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic, sopranos Barbara Bonney and Renée Fleming, pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy, violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and the Emerson String Quartet).

Prior to this week, the latest work of André Previn’s to have been given its world premiere by the BSO under the composer’s direction was his Double Concerto for Violin, Contrabass, and Orchestra; that was in April 2007, with soloists Anne-Sophie Mutter and the double bass player Roman Patkoló. Commissioned by the Freundeskreis Anne-Sophie Mutter Stiftung, a foundation established by Ms. Mutter to support young musicians, the work was premiered here at Mr. Previn’s own request, recognizing his longstanding and continuing association as a guest conductor with the BSO, with which he has appeared regularly since 1977 in Boston, Tanglewood, New York, and on a 1997 tour to Florida and the Canary Islands. The BSO has also performed his song cycle *Honey and Rue* on texts by Toni Morrison (in July 1993); the world premieres in their orchestral versions of *Sallie Chisum Remembers Billy the Kid* and *Vocalise* for soprano and orchestra (March 1996, *Sallie Chisum*...having previously received its world premiere, in its original version for soprano and piano, in an August 1996 Tanglewood recital); *Reflections* for English horn, cello solo, and orchestra (August 1996); the Piano Concerto (December 1998); the world premiere of the suite from his first opera *A Streetcar Named Desire* (July 1999); *Diversions* (April 2000, and then at Tanglewood in August 2001), and his Violin Concerto, a BSO commission written for Anne-Sophie Mutter (given its world premiere performances here in March 2002, then repeated and recorded live in October 2002).

Previn's current "big" project is his second opera, *Brief Encounter* (with a libretto by John Caird based on David Lean's film adaptation of the play by Noël Coward), commissioned by Houston Grand Opera and to be premiered there in May 2009. His first opera, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (on a libretto by Philip Littell based on Tennessee Williams's play), premiered in 1998 at San Francisco Opera with Previn conducting, was subsequently issued on compact disc and DVD, and has since had some twenty productions on both sides of the Atlantic. His orchestral work *Diversions* (1999), commissioned by the Mozarteum International Foundation, Salzburg, for the Vienna Philharmonic, was premiered in Salzburg as part of a Previn Festival in January 2000. Recent and current projects include new works for the Gewandhaus Orchestra of Leipzig and the Vienna Philharmonic; a new chamber work for the Boston Symphony Chamber Players (to be premiered in Jordan Hall in March 2009 with Previn as pianist); a Harp Concerto commissioned by the Pittsburgh Symphony (written as a retirement gift for that orchestra's principal harpist and premiered there under Previn's direction, the concerto will be performed by the Vienna Philharmonic in 2009); a new piano trio (to be premiered by Mr. Previn with Anne-Sophie Mutter and cellist Lynn Harrell in April 2009 at Carnegie Hall as part of an 80th-birthday celebration for the composer); a double concerto for Anne-Sophie Mutter and violist Yuri Bashmet, to be premiered in New York in 2009, and a Clarinet Sonata for BSO clarinetist Tom Martin.

In recent years, Previn's own observations have proved a useful guide to how and why he writes his music, which manages always to draw upon and combine just the right elements from his ever-broadening palette of musical-stylistic capabilities. What provokes him to compose is "knowing who will play the new piece, and when." As he observed when *Diversions* was premiered by the Vienna Philharmonic, "I can't write into the void; a commission means the promise of a performance. When I wrote the cello sonata for Yo-Yo Ma and the song cycle for Barbara Bonney, I was pleased to have the certainty of a specific artist and a performance date." It's no coincidence that in the past fifteen years—beginning with his song cycle *Honey and Rue*, written for Carnegie Hall and premiered there in 1992—he has composed more concert music than in the twenty years before that. This has followed naturally from his work as conductor and pianist with today's most important orchestras, singers, and instrumentalists. More recently, as his music is more widely performed and heard, he's also getting requests from people he doesn't know; "but so long as I'm aware of and can work within the time frame, I go ahead."

With *Owls*, André Previn has once more delivered a piece filled with just the right music for just the right time and occasion. In seeking a concert opener from the composer for this week's concerts, BSO Artistic Administrator Anthony Fogg requested a quiet piece rather than (in Previn's words) "a big, blazing opener." The title, Previn says, "doesn't have any profundity about it at all," but relates simply to a story he's happy to tell, and which is printed below.

Marc Mandel

HERE IS THE STORY BEHIND "OWLS," AS TOLD BY THE COMPOSER:

The idea dates back to when I was living in England, where I had a fifteen-acre woods, undeveloped, behind my house. One night I was wandering around at dusk and came upon two baby owls that had fallen out of a tree. I called the British equivalent of the ASPCA and was told to pick the owls up and bring them inside to save them (but without touching them, or other animals would then not go near them). The Society came and picked them up, then, when they were well, returned them to just where they'd been found; and they flew off.

When it came time for me to write this new piece, I found myself recalling this incident—a touching and moving story which I find all the more so, for being true—and used it as the basis for what I wrote. The orchestra is chaste—no trombones, no big percussion. And I decided to use paired woodwinds because whenever I happened to come upon animals in the woods, whether foxes, rabbits, quail, or deer, they were always in pairs, which gave me a lovely sense of quietude and peace.

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