



# OPERA FANTASIES FOR VIOLIN • 2

Verdi • Tchaikovsky  
Hagen • Sarasate • Gluck  
Hubay • Martinů  
Handel • Berger

Livia Sohn, Violin  
Benjamin Loeb, Piano  
Geoff Nuttall, Viola



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Even in the nineteenth century, when opera was all the rage but most people could not get to an opera house and there were no recordings, it was amazing how the great operatic melodies became known. They were played and sung at concerts, of course, and arrangements were churned out by bands on bandstands all over the civilised world. Local choral societies played their part: as I write, I have in front of me 'A Selection for Concert Performance' from Gounod's *Faust*, published by Novello in 1908 – my grandmother bought it the following year. It has her pencilled notes, such as 'Stand' at the start of the Soldiers' Chorus, arranged by John Pointer to include the sopranos and altos. No doubt she and her fellow choristers enjoyed belting it out to the words 'Glory and love to the man of old!'. Another method of spreading the word was via the instrumental operatic fantasy, although it was usually far beyond the capabilities of amateurs. The great pianists liked to compose works based on opera melodies, especially Liszt, although he called his pieces paraphrases. Instruments which could mimic the sustaining power of the human voice were natural vehicles for virtuoso display based on operas. Players of the clarinet and flute could choose from any number of fantasies, and violinists were well in the picture. It got to the point where certain operas, such as those of Rossini which had gone out of fashion, were known only by the violin pieces based on them – Paganini's *Mosè Fantasy*, for instance, or Ernst's *Otello Fantasy*.

Having said all that, our first piece is simply an excerpt from an opera, and very much out of character for its composer, Giuseppe Verdi. He was to write noble solos for his principal cello, as well as a string quartet, but he did not often feature the *violino principale* in a starring role. When he came to write his fourth opera, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, in 1842-43, the great violinist Niccolò Paganini had only recently died, so his exploits were fresh in the memory; and La Scala, for whom the work was intended, had a tradition of first-rate string playing – Alessandro Rolla had been 'Capo d'orchestra e primo violino per l'opera' from 1803 to 1833 and his successor Eugenio Cavallini (1806-81) was also a formidable player, to judge from his *Caprices* for violin. He had been in charge of Verdi's three previous operas and after a see-saw start to his career with *Oberto* and *Un giorno di regno*, the composer had scored a major hit with *Nabucco*. In incorporating a brief violin concerto into *I Lombardi*, Verdi was paying tribute to Cavallini, who presumably stood up to play it, directing for the rest of the evening (La Scala did not have an actual *Maestro Concertore* until the appointment in 1854 of Alberto Mazzucato, under whom Cavallini continued as *primo violino* until 1866). Consisting of a prelude with cadenza flourishes, a cantabile Andante and a Paganinian coda with a wistful ending, the concerto forms the *Preludio* to the best-known section of the opera, Part III, Scene 3. It leads into a dramatic sequence: Giselda lays the mortally wounded Oronte down by a rock on the floor of the cave occupied by the hermit Pagano, who baptises him with water from the Jordan before all three launch into the great trio *Qual voluttà trascorrere* and Oronte dies. The solo violin accompanies the entire scene, weaving in and out of the vocal lines, but we hear just the *Preludio*, arranged for violin and piano by Benjamin Loeb.

We move to the most celebrated operatic aria by Tchaikovsky, from his setting of Pushkin's tragic poetic novel *Eugene Onegin*, influenced by Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Onegin, the cynical equivalent to Mr Darcy, provokes a quarrel with his best friend, the poet Lensky, who has no alternative but to challenge him to a duel. Next morning Lensky and his second are first to arrive at the appointed place. The poet looks back over his life and reflects that his only regret, in being killed, is losing his adored Olga. The arrangement is by the great Hungarian violinist and teacher Leopold Auer (1845-1930), for whom Tchaikovsky wrote much original music. It is clear that Auer well understands Tchaikovsky's style, and the piece is designed to show off his famous cantilena.

**Tully Potter**

I have long desired to craft a pair of fairly short, virtuosic character-pieces replete with sentimental expression and admiring nods to the masters of the salon genre: composers like Gottschalk, and Boulanger, and performers like Serkin and Kreisler. The result is a diptych comprising *Valse Blanche* for violin and piano, and *Valse Noire*, for cello and piano. Subtitled *How Love Comes*, *Tangiers*, *October 1958*, my *Valse Blanche* is an operatic-paraphrase based on the two principal themes of my opera *A Woman in Morocco*. The rhapsodic variations that explore the doomed relationship between two lovers at a Tangiers pension in October 1958 are by turns lubricious, chaste, tormented, torchy, and doomed. The piece climaxes with a tune called *Love Comes With a Knife*. The violin takes the role of Lizzy, a young American journalist; the piano portrays Ahmed, the Moroccan major domo of the hotel. It may, of course, be the other way around. The duo was written for (and is dedicated to) violinist Livia Sohn and pianist Benjamin Loeb.

**Daron Hagen**

The acclaimed Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908) had many works written for him by such composers as Lalo and Bruch, but was himself an excellent composer for the violin. Besides his Spanish Dances, *Zigeunerweisen* and various arrangements, he put together virtuosic fantasies on numerous operas of the day. Of the two most popular, his *Carmen Fantasy* has been overtaken by one composed by the movie musician Franz Waxman, and his *Faust Fantasy*, like those of Vieuxtemps and Wieniawski, has virtually vanished from the concert hall. After an introduction, Sarasate takes us to Act 4 and Marguerite's prayer; then comes Mephistopheles's vigorous Act 3 song in praise of the Golden Calf; then the love duet of Faust and Marguerite from the Garden Scene in Act 3; and after a brief reference to Faust's Act 3 cavatina, we hear the waltz from Act 2. The Fantasy is tailored to Sarasate's light, fluid technique, which we can hear in the recordings he made in 1903.

The *Mélodie* from Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* is actually the *Dance of the Blessed Spirits* from Act 2, Scene 2. Orpheus has gone down to Hades to try to bring back his wife Euridice and after passing through a scene dominated by the Furies, he comes to Elysium. The original features the flute, but the arrangement by Fritz Kreisler (1875-1962) contrives to keep the calm atmosphere.

The 1894 two-act opera *The Violin Maker of Cremona*, one of seven written by the Hungarian violinist, composer and teacher Jenő Hubay, was the first Hungarian opera to gain an international reputation and was published in Paris in 1895. It achieved some 70 productions, including one in New York in 1897, but is now remembered solely by the *Intermezzo* from the end of Act 1. The plot concerns the hunchbacked luthier Filippo, who wins a contest for the best violin but renounces his prize, the hand of the beautiful Giannina, because he knows her heart is already given elsewhere. We hear him try out his violin, then play a memorable melody with an atmospheric passage in double-stops towards the end. Hubay, who used to perform the piece behind the scenes while the singer mimed, recorded it towards the end of his life, in 1928; and other violinists have taken it up. Truth to tell, it sounds more Hungarian than Italian, but it is beautifully written for the instrument.

The Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů wrote two sets of variations for cello and piano. The first, produced in 1942, the year after his arrival in America, was supposed to initiate a series of pieces for the Russian cellist Gregor Piatigorsky, but none of the others materialised. After a dramatic call to attention from the piano, the theme – actually one of Paganini's variations on the prayer from Rossini's opera *Mosè in Egitto* – is subjected to four substantial variations, the third of which is slow, before it is given a rather pompous restatement. Published in 1949, the Variations have become popular with cellists but seem to work equally well on the violin.

Handel's most celebrated tune is the so-called *Largo* – designated as *Larghetto* by the composer – from his 1738 opera *Serse*. It comes right at the start: as the curtain rises after the overture, we see King Xerxes of

Persia addressing a plane tree in a recitative and arietta and enjoying the shade it provides. The noble melody has been arranged for all manner of instruments and has been delivered by singers in all voice ranges – the original interpreter was the castrato Caffarelli. The transcription by the German violinist August Wilhelmj (1845-1908) preserves the dignity of the original and is typical of his arrangements in beginning in the low register and finishing in the high register.

#### Tully Potter

*The War Reporter* (2013) is the story of Paul Watson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist who was haunted by the voice of the dead soldier whose mutilated corpse he photographed in Mogadishu, who warned, "If you take that picture, I will own you forever", the rhythm of which permeates the work. The opera fantasy combines arias from throughout the work, including a grotesque waltz in which a sleazy lounge singer describes the soldier's violent murder, and Watson sings a song begging the soldier's family for forgiveness. The fantasy was written for, and is dedicated to, Livia Sohn.

Jonathan Berger's compositions include two operas, symphonic and chamber music including six string quartets. Current commissions include works for the Kronos Quartet, the St. Lawrence String Quartet, and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

#### Jonathan Berger

We end, as we began, with Verdi: the affecting duet between tenor hero and baritone villain in *La forza del destino*. Premiered in St Petersburg in 1862, this work influenced Mussorgsky's operas and was ahead of its time in treating of racial discrimination. Don Alvaro, who is half Inca, plans to elope with the daughter of the Spanish Marquis of Calatrava, but is caught in the act and accidentally kills her father. He is pursued relentlessly by her brother Carlo. At the start of Act 3 both men are fighting for the Spanish army in Italy, under assumed names. They swear friendship but then Alvaro is wounded. In the duet *Solenne in quest'ora* he entrusts a locked casket of papers to his 'friend', making Carlo swear to destroy them if he dies. It does not turn out well, but this scene is a rare moment of tranquillity in a turbulent score. Verdi entwines the two voices so skillfully that, if they are well matched, it can be difficult to tell who is singing – when the legendary record by Enrico Caruso and Antonio Scotti was first issued on a single-sided 78rpm disc, the Victor company printed the text on the blank side. Benjamin Loeb's transcription allots each voice to a different instrument, to make the most of Verdi's polyphony, while the piano looks after the orchestra.

#### Tully Potter

### Benjamin Loeb



Photo: Joshua Ford

Though since 2013 Benjamin Loeb has served primarily as the Executive Director of the Quad City (Iowa) Symphony Orchestra, he is also an accomplished soloist, accompanist, conductor, arranger, educator, and administrator. His piano performances have been heralded by the *Boston Globe*: "[his] vigorous, cogent playing signaled the kind of equally weighted partnership, plus competition, plus mutual quest, etc. that [makes] this music live." Recently, he performed with the Boston Pops Orchestra at the invitation and under the direction of Alan Gilbert. He has also collaborated with JoAnn Falletta, Carl St.Clair, and Rossen Milanov. He has recorded for Naxos (both as soloist and collaborative pianist), CBC, and the DSC label. He holds degrees from the Peabody Conservatory in Conducting, the Curtis Institute and The Juilliard School in Accompanying, and a BA from Harvard University.

### Geoff Nuttall



Photo: Marco Borggreve

The violinist Geoff Nuttall began playing the violin at the age of eight after moving to London, Ontario from College Station, Texas. He spent most of his musical studies under the tutelage of Lorand Fenyves at The Banff Centre, the University of Western Ontario, and the University of Toronto, where he received his bachelor of arts. In 1989 he co-founded the St. Lawrence String Quartet, with which, as first violinist, he has performed well over 2000 concerts throughout North and South America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. He has received two GRAMMY® nominations for the St. Lawrence Quartet's recording *Yiddishbuk*, a collection of works by the Argentinean-American composer Osvaldo Golijov. Their première recording of Robert Schumann *Quartets* won a Juno Award, granted by the Canadian Academy for Arts and Sciences for Best Classical Album, as well as the coveted German critics' award Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik. He is now on faculty at Stanford University, where the St. Lawrence Quartet is Ensemble-in-Residence.

## Livia Sohn



Violinist Livia Sohn performs widely on the international stage as concerto soloist, recitalist, and festival guest in Europe, North America, South America, and Asia. She gave her first public performance at the age of eight. In 1989, at the age of twelve, she won First Prize in the Yehudi Menuhin International Violin Competition. She attended the Juilliard Pre-College Division from the age of seven, at which time she began her studies with Dorothy DeLay and Hyo Kang. She continued under their tutelage at The Juilliard School, where she also studied chamber music with the legendary Felix Galamir. She plays a J. B. Guadagnini violin crafted in 1770 and a Samuel Zygmuntowicz made in 2006. She has been on faculty at the Music Department of Stanford University in California since 2005, and makes her home in the Bay Area with her husband, violinist Geoff Nuttall.



At a time when there were limited opportunities to attend the opera house, and before the existence of recordings, the operatic fantasy proved a popular and ingenious way to spread great melodies to a wider audience. Some classics of the genre are heard in this second volume – not least Wilhelmj's arrangement of Handel and Kreisler's beautifully tranquil arrangement of Gluck – but there are also memorable examples from Verdi and from Hubay's piquant opera *Le Luthier de Crémone*, as well as two vivid contemporary examples that continue the genre into the twenty-first century.

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| <p><b>1</b> Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901),<br/>arr. Benjamin Loeb: <i>Preludio</i> (from<br/><i>I Lombardi</i>, Act 3) (1843/2014) <b>4:01</b></p>          | <p><b>6</b> Jenő Hubay (1858-1937):<br/><i>Le Luthier de Crémone</i> (1895) <b>3:16</b></p>   |
| <p><b>2</b> Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-93),<br/>arr. Leopold Auer: <i>Lensky's Aria</i><br/>(from <i>Eugene Onegin</i>) (1878/1921) <b>5:32</b></p> | <p><b>7</b> Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959),<br/>arr. Benjamin Loeb: <i>Variations on a<br/>Theme of Rossini</i> (1942/2014)* <b>8:04</b></p>                              |
| <p><b>3</b> Daron Aric Hagen (b. 1961):<br/><i>Valse Blanche – How Love Comes,</i><br/><i>Tangiers, October 1958</i> (2014)* <b>6:14</b></p>             | <p><b>8</b> George Frideric Handel (1685-1759),<br/>arr. August Wilhelmj: <i>Largo</i><br/>(from <i>Xerxes</i>) (1738/1905) <b>5:01</b></p>                             |
| <p><b>4</b> Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908):<br/><i>Nouvelle Fantaisie sur des Thèmes<br/>de Faust</i> (Gounod) (1900) <b>11:43</b></p>                    | <p><b>9</b> Jonathan Berger (b. 1954):<br/><i>Fantasy on themes from<br/>The War Reporter</i> (2014)* <b>11:35</b></p>  |
| <p><b>5</b> Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-87),<br/>arr. Fritz Kreisler: <i>Mélodie</i> (from<br/><i>Orfeo ed Euridice</i>) (1774/1913) <b>2:30</b></p> | <p><b>10</b> Giuseppe Verdi, arr. Benjamin Loeb:<br/><i>Solenne in quest'ora</i> (from <i>La forza<br/>del destino</i>, Act 3) (1861/2014)<sup>†</sup>* <b>3:54</b></p> |

\* WORLD PREMIÈRE RECORDING

**Livia Sohn, Violin**

**Benjamin Loeb, Piano • Geoff Nuttall, Viola<sup>†</sup>**

Recorded in Campbell Recital Hall, Stanford University, California, USA, from 19th to 21st December, 2014

Produced, engineered, edited and mixed by David v.R. Bowles (Swineshead Productions, LLC)

Piano technician and tuner: Peter Sumner • Publishers: Benjamin Loeb Publishing (tracks 1 and 10);

Universal Edition (tracks 2, 6 and 8); Burning Sled Music (track 3); Public Domain (tracks 4 and 5);

Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers, Inc. (track 7); Noga Music Publications (track 9)

Booklet notes: Tully Potter, Daron Hagen and Jonathan Berger • Cover photo: Lisa-Marie Mazzucco