

by Noel Morris

Program Annotator

Pulse

Pulse is scored for three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion harp, piano, celeste and strings.

Brian Raphael Nabors

Brian Raphael Nabors (b.1991, Birmingham, AL) is a composer of emotionally enriching music that tells exciting narratives with its vibrant themes and colorful harmonic language. With an eclectic musical palate and crafty compositional technique to match, Nabors' music draws from combinations of Jazz Funk, R&B, and Gospel with the modern flair of contemporary classical music. Nabors' music has been performed by the Boston, Atlanta, Nashville, Cincinnati, Detroit, Fort Worth, and Munich Symphonies. His music has been performed at many events across the US, including National Orchestral Institute (NOI), and the Tanglewood Music Festival. He was named a 2019 composer fellow in the American Composer's Orchestra Earshot program with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra; a 2019 composer fellow with the Nashville Symphony Orchestra's Composer Lab; and 2019 cycle five grand prize winner of the Rapido! National Composition Contest. Nabors is also a 2020 Fulbright scholarship recipient to Sydney, Australia, studying with composer Carl Vine at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

From the composer:

My conception of Pulse began as a long contemplation of daily life as we know it, combined with thoughts of life in nature. The universe seems to have this natural rhythm to it. It is as if every living and moving thing we are aware and unaware of is being held together by a mysterious, resolute force. Pulse is an episodic rhapsody that explores several phases and colorful variants of rhythm all held together by an unwavering pulse.

Each episode is meant to symbolize a different scenario of life for the listener, be it a buzzing modern metropolis, a deep wilderness abundant with animalia, or the scenic endless abyss of the ocean. All of these worlds and their philosophical meanings are then brought together in a contemplative theme of "unification" in the strings that symbolizes our deep connection as living beings to everything within, over, under, and around us.

Suite from *The Incredible Flutist*

This suite is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano and strings.

Initially, Walter Piston trained as an artist. He attended a high school for the arts and enrolled at a college of art and design, where he studied architectural drawing. For a time, he worked as a draftsman for Boston Elevated Railroad Co. All the while, he

leaned on a favorite hobby to put money in his pocket—playing music. As a kid, he had taught himself violin and piano and was good enough to play in theater orchestras, dance bands and cafes.

Piston had just finished art school when the United States entered World War I. Before there was a draft, he enlisted in the Navy and volunteered to play saxophone in the Navy Band. Never mind that he didn't play saxophone—he learned it in just a few days.

At first, Piston's ability to pick up new instruments was a party trick. But the Navy Band gave him access to an ensemble of instruments, and he made it his mission to learn the basics of all the woodwinds.

Piston entered the war as a visual artist and returned as a musician. Back in Boston, he took a few remedial classes at Harvard before enrolling full-time in the music program. After he earned his degree in 1924, he spent a couple of years in Paris studying with the legendary composition teacher Nadia Boulanger (who also taught Aaron Copland and Astor Piazzolla). In 1926, Piston joined the faculty at Harvard. He wrote seminal textbooks, complete with his own illustrations, and composed many works, including two Pulitzer Prize-winning symphonies.

Piston ventured into the theater only once, composing the ballet *The Incredible Flutist* in 1938. He co-wrote the scenario with the dancer and choreographer Hans Wiener (Wiener changed his name to Jan Veen in 1941 to protest Germany's annexation of Austria).

The Incredible Flutist takes us into the heart of a sleepy New England town. Time moves slowly in this little hamlet until the traveling circus arrives.

The circus band enters to a rousing march that enlists the string players to hoot and holler. With the band comes “the Barker, the Jugglers, the Snake Dancer, the Monkey Trainer with her Monkeys, the Crystal Gazer, and, of course, the main attraction, the Flutist,” according to *Dance* magazine. The Flutist is a snake charmer who also casts his spell over the town's women. They dance and flirt until a jealous squabble ensues, but the Flutist sets everything right.

Piston offers a collection of traditional dances in his ballet, from the polka to the minuet to the Spanish waltz to the tango. He extracted a concert suite from the ballet in 1940.

Overture to *Semiramide*

This overture is scored for piccolo, flute, two oboes, clarinet, bassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion and strings.

Gioachino Rossini was born into a musical family in Pesaro, Italy. His mother was a working opera singer. When he was 14, he entered the conservatory in Bologna. In 1810, at the age of 18, he received his first opera commission. Incredibly, he composed another 33 operas before writing *Semiramide*—all by age 30.

It would be difficult to overstate Rossini's rock-star status. In 1823, the French author Stendhal wrote: “Napoleon is dead, but a new conqueror has already shown himself to the world; and from Moscow to Naples, from London to Vienna, from Paris to Calcutta, his name is constantly on every tongue. The fame of this hero knows no bounds save those of civilization itself—and he is not yet 32!”

After *Semiramide*, Rossini wrote five more operas and quit at age 37. He lived another four decades but refused all requests for more operas. Since that year, scholars

and Rossini fans have proposed explanations for what one author called “the great renunciation,” yet none has satisfied the curious or the heartbroken. In 1829, Rossini retired a wealthy man.

We know he suffered from depression and some unpleasant symptoms from chronic illness, yet he frequently welcomed friends and fellow composers into his home. Pursuing a passion for food, he inspired many chefs to dedicate recipes “alla Rossini.” After his last opera, he wrote numerous songs and his famous sacred choral work *Stabat mater*.

Semiramide comes from a blend of fact and fiction. The historical figure Sammu-ramat (Semiramis in Greek) was a Babylonian queen from the 9th century BCE. Quite unlike other royal women from that age, she remained on the throne after her husband’s death. By some accounts, she led her army to conquer neighboring peoples, and her life became the stuff of legend (and a popular board game). The ancient Greeks claimed she’d been born of a goddess. Other legends pegged her as a serial boyfriend killer and the inventor of pants (yes, pants).

Rossini based his opera on the 5-act play by Voltaire. The drama includes mistaken identity, a love triangle, and a near marriage between the queen and her long-lost son. In the end, he accidentally stabs her to death and ascends the throne. The overture contains themes from the opera and serves as an appetizer to the drama that follows.

***Les préludes*, Symphonic Poem No. 3**

***Les préludes* is scored for three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings.**

Before Beliebers and Beatlemania, Lisztomania swirled around the tall and willowy Franz Liszt, a piano dynamo with penetrating eyes and long, silky hair. The poet Heinrich Heine wrote, “How powerful, how shattering was his mere physical appearance.”

Liszt pushed the art of piano playing to dizzying heights, giving passionate recitals that drove women wild (picture ladies in puffy, long gowns fighting over a sweaty handkerchief). He kept gossip abuzz with romantic escapades and was a focal point for writers, musicians, and fashionable people across Europe.

Today, Liszt is a mainstay for classical pianists. His music tests players’ chops and offers a vehicle to show them off. But in the orchestral realm, he gave us something different. He pushed form and harmony into new territory there, lighting the way to the modern age.

Scholars credit Liszt with inventing the term “symphonic poem” in 1854 (a piece that conveys a poem, picture, or story). It represents a break from traditional compositions such as the symphony or the sonata. Where earlier compositions had formal structures and generic titles, Liszt was going for something freer and more poetic.

Les préludes, his most famous symphonic poem, flips the script on the idea, however. The flowery language came as an afterthought rather than an inspiration.

Originally, the composer conceived of the score as an overture to a set of choral pieces called *Les quatre éléments* (1844-1845), in which each “element” is a setting of a poem by Joseph Autran. Like many overtures, the music previews themes from the work that

follows. But Liszt had a change of heart and decided to repurpose his overture for a set of 12 symphonic poems. To build on the programmatic aspect of a symphonic poem, Liszt found an ode by Alphonse de Lamartine and borrowed the title *Les préludes*. The published score includes a preface written in the hand of Liszt's companion at the time, Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein.

Preface

“What else is our life but a series of preludes to that unknown Hymn, the first and solemn note of which is intoned by Death?—Love is the glowing dawn of all existence, but what is the fate where the first delights of happiness are not interrupted by some storm, the mortal blast of which dissipates its fine illusions, the fatal lightning of which consumes its altar; and where is the cruelly wounded soul which, on issuing from one of these tempests, does not endeavor to rest his recollection in the calm serenity of life in the fields? Nevertheless, man hardly gives himself up for long to the enjoyment of the beneficent stillness which at first he has shared in Nature's bosom, and when ‘the trumpet sounds the alarm,’ he hastens to the dangerous post, whatever the war may be, which calls him to its ranks, in order, at last, to recover in the combat full consciousness of himself and entire possession of his energy.”