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utterly ecstatic,

Saturday, December 7, 2013, 7:30pm | Sunday, December 8, 2013, 2:00pm
Mandeville Auditorium, UCSD

KERNIS Musica Celestis

Steven Schick conducting

HEMBREE Ikarus-Azur NEE COMMISSION

David Chase conducting

INTERMISSION

RAVEL Daphnis and Chloé

Steven Schick conducting

Scene 1
Scene 2
Scene 3

*For scene descriptions, please see
"A brief summary of the action and music" in the Ravel program note.*

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Mission Statement

Rooted in San Diego for over 50 years, the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus enriches our lives through affordable concerts of ground-breaking, traditional and contemporary classical music.

From the Conductor



Please forgive me for starting with a dictionary definition. But I was curious about the etymology of the word “ecstatic” and looked it up. It turns out it didn’t originally mean “really, really happy” in the way we often use it. Ecstatic comes from the Greek word *ekstasis* and means, literally, unstable. So, why, you might ask, are we calling our concert “utterly ecstatic?” Are we in fact celebrating the joys to be found in instability, in becoming unmoored to reality?

Well, yes, I guess we are. OmG! And my yoga teacher tells me to be as grounded and stable as possible!

It could be that perfect balance is an overrated virtue, in music as in life. The composer Stuart Smith is fond of saying that a balanced system creates no heat. His phrase is a modern reformulation of William Blake’s famous adage—the motto of every crazy artist I’ve ever known—that “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.”

With this concert we’ll sketch three essays in defiance of stasis and normalcy. Aaron Jay Kernis’s *Musica Celestis* lives up to its name and seems to this listener to be utterly untethered to earthly reality. It floats more serenely, glows with more incandescence, and sings with greater joy than nearly any recent work for string orchestra that I know. And as the opening work for this concert it starts us thinking about the fickle chemistry of joy.

The heart of our celebration of ecstasy comes with two works composed for exactly the same instrumentation. Paul Hembree’s *Ikarus-Azur* is this year’s Nee commission. The fact that Paul eagerly accepted the challenge I posed to him of creating a work for the same scoring as Ravel’s masterpiece *Daphnis and Chloé* speaks to the fearless inventiveness of this young composer. Offering a new take on a classic and revered piece is not for the faint of heart, and Hembree’s piece succeeds beautifully. By treating the Icarus myth he underlines the relationship between ecstasy and risk. Icarus, as I’m sure you’ll recall, tried to fly so high that he came too close to the sun and the wax with which he fashioned his wings melted. He plummeted into the sea. The story is usually told as a cautionary tale about the risks of hubris. Only through extreme arrogance, we are led to believe, would a human pretend to be a god. Flying that high was simply tempting fate. Judging by the number of sayings in many languages, from “cortar las alas” (clipping someone’s wings in Spanish) or our taking someone “down a notch” to the colorfully Australian “cutting down tall poppies,” it isn’t really the gods but we humans who are suspicious of those who stand out. But Hembree’s piece makes me think that Icarus’s exceptionalism was not his weakness but his path to joy, indeed to ecstasy. How delicious must

it have been to be so far from earth, so completely unbound by human convention, as was Icarus as he approached the sun.

Ravel shows another side of the seductive dance of ecstasy and risk. The most abbreviated version of Ravel’s story is that the path towards true love is full of obstacles. And, the greater the number of obstacles and the longer the path, the sweeter its reward will be. In Ravel’s music ecstasy is epitomized by motion. Ravel’s is archetypically keyboard music. Even in this rich orchestral score there is the constant sweep from high to low, dark to bright, melodic to chordal, as though a pianist’s hands were running across a keyboard. Performing Ravel requires an understanding that these sweeps across the orchestral “keyboard” are metaphors for the transitory joys of life. They represent impermanence and instability. Like the elusive play of light on water, the search for great passion trades in the ineffable. It is both ultimately desirable and ultimately ungraspable. So it’s the allure of the quest that draws us in. Through *Daphnis* we understand that one doesn’t risk everything because finding a great

love is a sure bet for eternal happiness, one risks everything because at the very heights of love eternity has no meaning.

Returning to earth: there is a lot of talk in the orchestral world that the future of the orchestra as an institution requires that music be made as accessible as possible by rooting its repertoire in the common experiences of its listeners. There are lots of ways to make music approachable, and some of them seem worthy to me. But ultimately this project rings false. We need music not to confirm our flatfooted quotidian selves but to shake them up. We need music to illuminate the inaccessible, the improbable and the unstable. The ecstatic! We crave a little taste, just a peek at ecstasy. And through music we can get pretty close.

As you listen tonight imagine the sweet ecstasy of Icarus for yourself: you’re flying higher and higher; the sun is ever warmer on your back and the melting wax smells like perfumed oil as it drips from your wilting wings. For the briefest moment, even as the sea below rushes towards you, there’s no difference between falling and flying. ■

Steven Schick conductor

For more than 30 years Steven Schick has championed contemporary music as a percussionist and teacher by commissioning and premiering more than 100 new works. Schick is a professor of music at the University of California, San Diego and in 2008 was awarded the title of Distinguished Professor by the UCSD Academic Senate.

Schick was one of the original members and percussionist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars of New York City (1992-2002). He has served as artistic director of the Centre International de Percussion de Genève in Geneva, Switzerland, and as consulting artist in percussion at the Manhattan School of Music. Schick is founder and artistic director of the acclaimed percussion group, red fish blue fish, a UCSD ensemble composed of his graduate percussion students that performs regularly throughout San Diego and has toured

internationally. He also is founding artistic director (June 2009) of “Roots & Rhizomes”—an annual international course for percussionists hosted by the Banff Center for the Arts in Canada.

As a percussion soloist, Schick has appeared in Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, The Royal Albert Hall (London), Centre Pompidou (Paris), The Sydney Opera House and Disney Hall among many other national and international venues.

Schick is a frequent guest conductor with the International Contemporary Ensemble (Chicago and New York City), and in 2011 he was appointed artistic director and conductor of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. Schick has been music director and conductor of the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus since 2007.

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Program Notes

by Eric Bromberger

Musica Celestis

AARON JAY KERNIS

Born January 15, 1960, Philadelphia



Aaron Jay Kernis composed his *String Quartet No. 1* in 1990, and it was first performed in November of that year by the Lark Quartet. But Kernis saw larger possibilities in the quartet's slow movement, and the following year he arranged that movement for string orchestra.

Titled *Musica Celestis* (Music of the Heavens), the new work was premiered on March 30, 1992, by the Sinfonia San Francisco under the direction of Ransom Wilson. In a note in the published score, Kernis says: "*Musica Celestis* is inspired by the medieval conception of that phrase, which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end... *Musica Celestis* follows a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern through a number of variations (like a passacaglia), and is framed by an introduction and coda."

The angels sing with extraordinary clarity and luminosity in the eleven-minute *Musica Celestis*, which is cast in a slow-fast-slow structure. The ethereal introduction gradually makes way for the long principal melody. This is stated slowly at first but then accelerates across the span of its transformations, growing more animated as it proceeds. This energy breaks off suddenly in mid-phrase, and material from the introduction returns to draw the music into silence. Throughout, Kernis writes with a subtle sense of string color (he trained originally as a violinist): solo instruments are set in contrast to the larger string orchestra, at moments some but not all of the instruments are muted, particular passages are played without vibrato, and dynamics are notated with scrupulous precision throughout *Musica Celestis*.

Aaron Jay Kernis studied at the San Francisco Conservatory, Manhattan School of Music, and Yale School of Music. He has been Composer-in-Residence with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 for his *String Quartet No. 2*. For some years Kernis served as New Music Advisor for the Minnesota Orchestra, which performed *Musica Celestis* as part of its 2004 European tour. ■

Ikarus-Azur

PAUL HEMBREE

Born March 14, 1982, Durango, CO



The composer has supplied a program note for this work:

Ikarus-Azur is a musical response to humankind's ambivalent relationship to both nature and technology. We value technology for its ability to lift us out of adverse natural situations and environments, yet we rely on those natural environments for their ecological productivity and beauty, things which can be degraded by technology. Our Promethean flames, our Icarian wings, the fruits of our technological labors have become as powerful as any natural phenomena. Truly, the sublime, that pleasurable sense of terror when faced by forces more powerful than any single human, is now the purview of both nature—and technology. What are we to do? Shall we

reject the offspring of our minds, our concepts corporealized as metal and electricity, in favor of nature's harsh dominion? Or will we trample and decimate our habitats as fuel and raw materials for the inexorable march of reason and technology? *Ikarus-Azur* dwells upon this dialectic by synthesizing celebrated poetry by Stéphane Mallarmé, Gottfried Benn, Henry David Thoreau and Aeschylus into an emotionally charged narrative. Ultimately, we have no answers, only questions—for we are haunted by the azure. ■

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David Chase conductor

Choral Director of the La Jolla Symphony Chorus since 1973, David Chase serves as a lecturer in the UCSD Music Department.

Under his leadership the 130-voice ensemble performs a mixture of musical styles that combine standard repertory with new or rarely performed works on the LJS&C subscription series and at community venues.

Dr. Chase is a graduate of Ohio State University, and received his doctorate at the University of Michigan. While living in Ann Arbor, he served as conductor of the Grand Rapids Symphonic Choir. In 2009, he retired

from Palomar College in San Marcos, California, where he taught music since 1974. In addition to his academic and choral duties, Dr. Chase has performed and recorded with the Robert Shaw Festival Chamber Chorus in Souillac, France and at Carnegie Hall. He also has been a fellow in the Melodious Accord Fellowship with Alice Parker in New York City. His compositions are published by Shawnee Press and Concordia Music Publishers.

Dr. Chase and members of the chorus have made four European tours, a tour of Mexico, and in 2001 were the first Western chorus invited to perform in the Kingdom of Bhutan. In spring 2012, the chorus traveled to Carnegie Hall to perform Britten's Spring Symphony.

Ikarus-Azur Hembree

*The text for this work is composed of fragments from four authors.
Alignment on the page indicates what source the text fragments come from.*

Stéphane Mallarmé

L'Azur (1864)

Gottfried Benn

Ikarus (1915)

Henry David Thoreau

Smoke (1843)

Aeschylus (trans. Thoreau)

Prometheus Bound (1843)

The eternal azure

overwhelms

my mind,

draw the poppy to my brow.

Light winged *flame**,

floating.

Icarian bird,

drifting.

Melting feather,

in upward flight, *burning.*

Still floating,

Through mountain scree,

dusty carrion,

serrated rocks,

Across the *shore's* sterile sands.

Waters, shattering,

crashing, shining,

on the reef's

shadowed forms below.

Great arched one,

I sense it watching,

the passing sun.

Rise up fog, arise,

let *cool* ashes fall

by day.

Rise up fog, arise,

with long trails of mist,

darken the light.

Rise up fog, cover over me,

rise up fog and silence the sky.

Rise up walls,

build shelter over me,

rise up walls and silence the sky.

Gather mud and reeds,

to blot out the *burning* sun.

Gather *brick and stone,*

to block the blue holes

that birds create.

Extinguish in the horror,

of black trails of soot,

the silent lark, messenger of dawn,

below the dancing sun,

circling above,

the plunge of the double suns'

ceaseless falling.

Departed dream of *night,*

of shadowed omen.

Departed dream of midnight vision.

My incense, by night star veiling,

go upward from this hearth,

fly skyward from the earth,

and ask the gods

to pardon this flame,

this teacher of all art to mortals.

Alas! The azure triumphs.

I hear the bells ringing,

I hear the azure singing.

The living metal erupts

as blue angelus bells.

Roaring forth *from night,*

sun, *ignite the morning sky.*

Ancient, it rolls across the mist,

traversing my agony

like a sure sword.

What fluttering do I hear?

What echo from god, from mortal,

or from *the fire,*

what echo has flown *far* to me?

For the air *rushes*

with the soft *shifting* of wings.

I pay, fixed *in strong* chains

under the *stark, unforgiving* sky.

* *Words in italics are alterations or insertions by the composer.*

Daphnis and Chloé

MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, Basses-Pyrennes
Died December 28, 1937, Paris



In 1909 the impresario Serge Diaghilev brought the Ballets Russes to Paris as part of his ongoing presentation of things Russian (art, sculpture, icons, opera, ballet) in the City of Light. The ballet's seasons in Paris would prove a spectacular success—over the next four years, an unknown young Russian composer would write *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring* for them. But even before he thought of asking Stravinsky to compose the first of these, Diaghilev approached Ravel during the summer of 1909 and asked him to write a score for the Ballets Russes. The French composer, then 34, could not have had more distinguished collaborators: Diaghilev oversaw the project, Mikhail Fokine was choreographer, Leon Bakst designed the sets, and Vaclav Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina would dance the lead roles.

But it proved a stormy collaboration. For the subject, Diaghilev proposed the story of Daphnis and Chloé, a pastoral by the Greek Longus (fourth or fifth century B.C.). Translated into French in 1599 by Pierre Amyot, the tale had already attracted composers: Jacques Offenbach wrote an operetta called *Daphnis and Chloé* in 1870, and the young Debussy had thought of writing a ballet based on the same tale. It tells a gentle love story: a young man and woman, abandoned as infants by their respective parents and raised by a shepherd and a goatherd, meet and fall in love. She is kidnapped by pirates but rescued by the intercession of the god Pan, and the ballet concludes with general rejoicing. That story seems simple enough, but quickly the collaborators were at odds, as Ravel made clear in a letter to a friend: “I must tell you that I’ve just had an insane week:

preparation of a ballet libretto for the next Russian season. Almost every night, work until 3 a.m. What complicates things is that Fokine doesn’t know a word of French, and I only know how to swear in Russian. In spite of the interpreters, you can imagine the savor of these meetings.” Part of the problem was that while Bakst had conceived an opulent oriental setting for the ballet, Ravel imagined “a vast musical fresco, less thoughtful of archaism than of fidelity to the Greece of my dreams, which identifies quite willingly with that imagined and depicted by late eighteenth-century French artists.” Paintings of the verdant sets suggest that Ravel’s conception—described by Madeline Goss as “a typically eighteenth-century atmosphere of Watteau shepherdesses”—finally prevailed.

Once the libretto was settled, Ravel set to work. He composed the score in a quiet villa in Fontainebleau, working with such concentration that he was unaware of a flood that pushed the Seine over its banks and to the sill of the room where he was working. But for all this intensity, Ravel composed *Daphnis and Chloé* very slowly. The score was not complete until the spring of 1912, a span of three years (during that same time, Stravinsky wrote *Firebird* and *Petrushka*, both had been produced, and he was halfway through *The Rite*). The premiere, conducted by Pierre Monteux at the Châtelet Théâtre on June 8, 1912, had an indifferent success: the production was under-rehearsed, the participants were still bickering, the dancers had problems with the 5/4 meter of the concluding *Danse générale*, and Paris was still aflutter from the scandal generated the previous week by Nijinsky’s choreography of *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, which had been a little too graphic erotically. *Daphnis and Chloé* had only one more production that season, but for those who could see beyond the problems of the premiere, the ballet had an overwhelming impact. The poet and dramatist Jean Cocteau, then only 23, was among them: “*Daphnis et Chloé* is one of the creations which fell into our hearts like

a comet coming from a planet, the laws of which will remain to us forever mysterious and forbidden.”

Ravel drew two suites from the ballet for concert performance, but this program offers the extremely rare opportunity to hear the score to the complete ballet. Those who know only the familiar *Suite No. 2* will discover that it is just the closing celebration and that much of it depends on material introduced earlier. Ravel planned the ballet with great care, saying that “The work is constructed symphonically according to a strict tonal plan, by means of a small number of motifs, whose development assure the symphonic homogeneity of the work.” Many of these motifs are introduced in the first few measures: the muted horns’ gently swaying figure, the solo flute’s high melody, a soaring theme for solo horn that will be associated with Daphnis and Chloé themselves—all these will evolve and return in many forms across the hour-long span of the ballet. More immediately impressive is the sumptuous sound of this music—Ravel makes inspired use of his extravagant forces, which include not just a huge orchestra, but a wordless chorus, wind machine, fourteen different percussion instruments, and offstage wind-players.

A brief summary of the action and music:

out of the opening mists, the seminal motifs are heard and—with statues of nymphs in the background—Daphnis and Chloé appear and feel twinges of jealousy as others swirl around them. A dance contest is proposed, with the winner to receive a kiss from Chloé. Dorcon, a cowherd and secret rival for Chloé’s affections, offers a clumsy dance (the orchestra “laughs” at his efforts), but Daphnis’ graceful dance wins him the prize. All exit but Daphnis, and now Lyceion enters and tries to tempt him with her sensual dance—her veil falls from her shoulders repeatedly, but Daphnis cannot be swayed. A sudden outcry marks the arrival of the pirates. Chloé appears in panic, seeks the protection of the nymphs, but is captured and carried off by pirates. The distraught Daphnis recognizes what has happened and collapses before the statues of the nymphs.

At this point (which is the beginning of the *Suite No. 1*), a strange light suffuses the stage, the nymphs come to life, and the god Pan begins to take shape to the eerie sound of the wind machine. The nymphs awaken Daphnis, who prostrates himself in front of Pan, and the stage goes dark. The scene changes to a rugged coastline. Pirates enter by torchlight and do their barbaric dance, which Ravel marks *Animé et très rude*. Chloé is brought in, her hands bound, and seeks mercy; she tries to flee, but is returned to the pirate chieftain, who prepares to carry her off. Suddenly the atmosphere changes: flames spring up all over the stage, fantastic creatures surround the pirates, Pan himself emerges from the earth, and all flee in terror.

The scene dissolves, and we return to the landscape of the opening, but now it is night and rivulets drip from the rocks (the famous *Suite No. 2* begins at this point). Rippling flutes and clarinets echo the sound of these rivulets as Daphnis awakes and the sun comes up—this glorious music is derived from the soaring horn melody heard at the very beginning of the ballet. Chloé appears, and the joyful lovers are united. Told that Pan had saved her in memory of the nymph Syrinx, Daphnis and Chloé now act out that tale in pantomime, and Daphnis mimes playing on reeds, a part taken in the orchestra by an opulent flute solo. The two collapse into each other’s arms and pledge their love. The stage is filled with happy youths, whose *Danse générale* brings the ballet to a thrilling conclusion.

The final word may be left to another who was at the premiere. Igor Stravinsky would later have some snippy things to say about Ravel, but he was overwhelmed by *Daphnis and Chloé*, calling it “not only Ravel’s best work, but also one of the most beautiful products of all French music.” ■

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