

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Symphonie Fantastique

WITH JOËL VAISSE ON TROMBONE CONCERTO

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Paul Dukas (1865-1935)

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

Music is full of one-hit wonders, especially in rock 'n' roll. But the world of classical music has its share of composers known for a single work, even if they devoted a lifetime to otherwise neglected or now-forgotten pieces.

Think Johann Pachelbel's ubiquitous *Canon*, Carl Orff's explosive *Carmina Burana*, or Bedrich Smetana's flowing *Moldau*. Then there's our friend Paul Dukas, who will be forever linked to a magical broom that, well, swept his career into a corner.

Millions came to know Dukas in the 1940 Disney animated classic *Fantasia*, which featured a work written nearly a half-century earlier, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. But long before the film, this brief orchestral scherzo stood out, overshadowing his ballet *La Peri*; the *Piano Sonata*; the *Rameau Variations*; the opera *Ariane and Bluebeard*; and the *Symphony in C*.

Sorcerer's Apprentice brought in royalties but became a thorn in the composer's side, a stereotype that made the Frenchman appear one-dimensional. Even today, it hinders a "fuller understanding of Dukas, as that single work is far better known than its composer," notes the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.

Composed in 1897 and based on Goethe's poem, *Der Zauberlehrling*, the music depicts a sorcerer's helper who – too lazy to clean his master's workshop and fill a bathtub – enchants a broom to do the work for him. But lacking the requisite mystical skills, he can't stop the broom from delivering pails of water, and the tub overflows. Frantic, the apprentice cuts the broom in half, only to create two goon-sweepers that work at even greater speed, flooding the room. Soon, an army of brooms runs amok, until the sorcerer returns and breaks the spell.

Dukas captured Goethe's story through a flurry of instrumental color, tension and release, and rhythmic nuance. The music opens mysteriously, and teases with hints of a theme and well-placed orchestral outbursts. Plucked strings give way to a lone clarinet, then oboe, then flute. A loud drum beat brings everything to a halt before the music lurches ominously forward.

Then, a trio of bassoons introduces the famous Hitchcockian theme – the broom has awoken. The full orchestra embraces the tune in a whirlwind of energy before the bassoons return and everyone closes in riotous unison.

Sorcerer's Apprentice is fun to hear, and a model of program music; knowing the plot line keeps us focused on how the music progresses. But did Dukas, or Goethe, pin a moral to this light-hearted story? Yes: Leave magic to the professionals.

Thierry Caens (1958-)
***Contrasts for Trombone* (world premiere of orchestral version)**

As a listener in the audience, it's always intriguing to be part of the first-ever public performance of a new work. It's even more interesting to witness a premiere for an instrument we rarely see solo on stage: the trombone.

This protracted and noble member of the brass family sits at the back of the orchestra, usually hidden behind a thicket of other players. Its resonance – ranging from a rasp to a blast – helps blend the colors of the orchestra, and deepens the palette in such pieces as the *Tuba mirum* from Mozart's *Requiem*, Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*, or just about anything by Bruckner.

But extended trombone solos, much less full concertos, are rare, which makes this latest masterworks program intriguing. In an all-French lineup, TFO's Principal Trombone Joël Vaïsse takes center stage in the premiere of an orchestral version of *Contrasts* by the composer and virtuoso trumpeter Thierry Caens.

"It's a very cool piece to play, very demanding and rhythmic, like movie music with a lot of contrasts," Vaïsse says. "And for the audience, it's very pleasant to listen to."

Caens composed the piece in 2012 for trombone and brass ensemble, then orchestrated it this year as a TFO commission and Vaïsse as soloist. Having premiered *Contrasts* in France in its original version, Vaïsse thought it would go over well with audiences in Tampa Bay.

"We chose it because we wanted to feature our principal trombone and this piece was written just for him," says TFO General Manager Edward Parsons.

Scored in one movement, *Contrasts* opens with a somber theme taken up by the soloist, who eludes a tonal center long enough to give the music an edgy quality. The work quickly grows intense, sounding war-like through the insistent barrage of kettledrums, and follows with a subdued middle section. A dissonant crescendo builds, the trombone slipping in and out of the orchestra's complex textures, and the music ends in delirious upheaval.

For the soloist, the music demands a laser focus on technique from the lowest to the highest register.

"It's very challenging and quite crazy," Vaïsse says. "When the orchestra plays at full power, the solo part is very challenging and you need a lot of stamina."

Whether *Contrasts* becomes part of the repertoire and performed around the world remains to be seen, but giving the trombone a chance to shine is important.

"This is a big change for me, to present the trombone to the listener, and for once the instrument won't sit in the back of the orchestra," Vaïsse adds. "It also can be a solo instrument and sing like a piano or violin. This gives me a chance to show what the trombone can do and the emotion it can convey."

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)
Symphonie Fantastique, Op. 14

To say Hector Berlioz wore his heart on his sleeve would be an understatement. Music for the great French composer was not an objective art with a strict adherence to rules, but an extension of his emotions and fantasies. To hear a work by Berlioz is to be immersed in autobiography.

“Which of the two powers, love or music, can elevate man to the most sublime heights?” he once said. “Why separate them? They are two wings of the soul.”

Berlioz was a mercurial, blunt, passionate and determined idealist. Had he chosen painting instead of composing, his canvases would be on fire with color. His personality makes itself known in a single bar of music, undeniable and quickly etched in the mind. His skill as an orchestrator, penchant for vivid tonal hues, soaring literary subjects and the embodiment of images, ideas and feelings into his scores helped Berlioz open the door to the Romantic era in music.

Everything for Berlioz was big. His colossal *Requiem* and *Te Deum* require such large forces – and expense – they are seldom performed (TFO last staged the *Requiem* 20 years ago). He wrote no significant chamber music. This may have been as much hard-wired egocentrism as a reflection of the era, notes Jan Swafford in his book *The Vintage Guide to Classical Music*: “It was an age when artists were expected to be excessive, profligate, on the edge of sanity. In other words, Berlioz’s personality and self-consciousness were symptomatic of his time.”

Berlioz fueled much of his thinking with literature, and by the time he entered the Paris Conservatory at age 22, he had immersed himself in the works of Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe and Sir Walter Scott. From books, Berlioz fashioned his music as program – as opposed to absolute, or abstract music – and each of his creations tells a vivid and imaginative story.

The most famous of these is his preternatural *Symphonie Fantastique* of 1830, a macabre, surreal, emotive, drug-induced nightmare. It also introduced the *idée fixe*, or “fixed idea,” a short motif that reappears throughout the symphony and adds structural coherence.

Originally titled *Episode in the Life of an Artist: Fantastic Symphony in Five Movements*, the work is remarkable for a 26-year-old composer, as it displays a mastery of orchestration, a dynamic spectrum of mood, and a boldness unprecedented at the time. It also transformed the symphony into the realm of explicit drama: The orchestra no longer played within traditional confines, but as a living, breathing animal. Reflecting on the work years later, Berlioz said he composed it in “a mental boil.”

Symphonie Fantastique is biographical in that it expresses his love for an Irish actress named Harriet Smithson, the subject of the recurring motif. When a young artist – Berlioz – realizes his feelings are unrequited, he falls into a reverie in five parts:

1. *Dreams and Passions* – The artist recalls the longing he suffered before meeting his beloved
2. *A Ball* – The *idée fixe* theme appears in an energetic waltz
3. *In the Country* – He finds peace in the shepherd’s flute, but a storm lingers

4. *March to the Scaffold* – In an opium-induced dream, he kills his lover and is marched to his death
5. *A Witches' Sabbath* – His lover mocks him in a demonic orgy of tolling bells and the Medieval plainchant *Dies Irae*, or *Day of Wrath*

“It’s such a powerful piece because of how it deals with mental illness and obsession,” says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “It’s really unique; there is nothing else like it in music.”

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.