
May 5 Program Notes:

Mark Grey (b. 1967)

Frankenstein Symphony

Mark Grey was born on January 1, 1967 in Evanston, Illinois and resides in Petaluma, CA. Grey composed Frankenstein Symphony in 2015 on a co-commission from the Atlanta Symphony and Berkeley Symphony.

First performance: February 25, 2016, with Robert Spano conducting the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. Grey has scored the work for piccolo, flute, 2 oboes, English horn, clarinet in B-flat, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, vibraphone, claves, large tamtam, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel, xylophone, high and medium woodblocks, small anvil, large floor tom, maracas, snare drum, castanets, celesta, harp, and strings. Duration: approximately 35 minutes.

Anonymously published in 1818, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) continues to cast its spell two centuries later, fascinating and appalling us through its masterful treatment of themes that remain disturbingly pertinent. It's not hard to fathom why this material would appeal to a composer. For Mark Grey, Mary Shelley's iconic novel became the source for his longest work to date, the grand opera *Frankenstein* (about

2 hours and 15 minutes), which was commissioned by the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, where it will receive its premiere.

Grey was asked by Robert Spano of the Atlanta Symphony to fashion an orchestral suite from the opera. In recent years Grey has received other commissions from the ASO, including his fanfare *Āhshā* (2011) and the orchestral version of *Atash Soroushan* (*Fire Angels*), a work originally written to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The orchestral *Frankenstein* project appealed to Joana Carneiro and Berkeley Symphony as well, who became co-commissioners. With this concert, Berkeley Symphony is performing the work of Grey, a Bay Area native, for the first time. Along with his career as a composer, Grey is an acclaimed sound designer closely associated with John Adams. He met Adams in 1991 and has designed the electronic sound for the premieres of all of Adams' stage works since then, as well as his "plugged" concert works that require this technology (such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Transmigration of Souls*). Grey has additionally been a resident sound designer for the Metropolitan Opera and Chicago Lyric Opera.

"For me the connection between

Mark Grey

composing and the world of sound design is tightly woven," explains Grey. "I live fully surrounded by a sonic environment no matter what the project is. The expansion of sound design is a focus for me—not just in the opera house but also for orchestral sound designs." Grey also works frequently in the theater, and his music has been widely performed across America, in Europe, and in Australia.

The *Frankenstein Symphony* is, unusually, being heard before the opera itself. But the work is not a typical concert suite of extracts from a larger opera score. "The transfer from stage representation to a purely symphonic concert can be awkward," Grey observes. "Quite often the orchestration is thin when there's a voice to allow the singer to resonate in the hall. The orchestra becomes more accompanimental, unlike in the parts written specifically for that idiom (the overture, for example). I decided to take a different approach and adapt the vocal lines to various instruments." The result was not a "direct translation" of the vocal music to instruments, but an exploration of varied colors in which "I tried to really meld what was originally vocal music with the textual accompaniment and create one solid identity."

Grey opted for a symphonic model

rather than a "grab-bag" suite, the latter being an assemblage often put together posthumously from pre-existing material, as in various suites of Wagner's operas constructed for the concert hall. "My idea was to develop the vocal music in this new context and to create the emotions around the melodic lines. 'Symphony' implies more organicism in the way the pieces are linked together, the relationships of melodic and harmonic and rhythmic material."

Frankenstein Symphony comprises five movements. These do not follow the chronological order of the opera, but they do explore "the heart of what this opera is"—which Grey defines as "a triangle between Victor, the Creature, and his beloved Elizabeth." He adds that in his opera, his intention has been "to get more closely into the heartbeat of what this novel is: not just the socio-political side, but the human side. The Creature pulls Victor into the surreal, while Elizabeth pulls him back to the reality of home."

Mark Grey has provided the following description:

Frankenstein Symphony, written in five movements, is inspired by two works: Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, and my grand opera *Frankenstein* written for

La Monnaie/De Munt, to premiere at Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels.

The music for the symphony is drawn from five opera scenes; *Genesis*, *The Letter*, *The Lab*, *The Trial*, and *The Body*.

2016 marks the 200-year anniversary of the novel's conception when, during an unusually stormy summer in Geneva, the Shelleys, Byron, and others created horror stories to help pass the time.

The philosophy behind the Symphony is built on the foundation of the Frankenstein story and its relevance to modern day life—the gap between inventive science and transformative science, the fracture between our ability to invent and our inability to understand that every invention requires from us a parallel moral or emotional response and developmental period. The divisions between creation and social transformation are nothing new. Often, we invent but take no responsibility for the consequences of our inventions.

Our stage adaptation navigates new twists through this old tale. We open the opera some 400 years later with Walton and scientists finding the “Creature” locked in a block of ice. It is thawed, reanimated, and, regaining life, takes us back through the storyline, setting many similar scenes to those in the novel.

Each of the symphonic movements represents a key moment in the opera

and our adaptation from book to stage. Originally in Shelley's novel, it opens (and closes) in the Arctic when a nearly dead Victor Frankenstein drifts up to Robert Walton's ship locked in polar ice. As Victor is nursed back to consciousness he tells an horrific tale of creating a beast, its demand for a mate, its rejection and rage turning to revenge, and Victor's ultimate pursuit north to kill the monster.

Genesis opens the opera with the reanimation and awakening of the Creature. In *The Letter*, Elizabeth, fiancée of Victor, in a lonely moment insists he return home so they can become husband and wife. But Victor is preoccupied in *The Lab* creating a mate for the Creature, which he never finishes. Through constant rejection because of its hideous looks, the Creature begins a killing spree where William, the younger brother of Victor, is the first victim and au pair Justine is framed for the murder. During *The Trial*, Justine is found guilty and hanged. *The Body* is a classic operatic moment that finds Victor singing an aria over Elizabeth's dead body—the Creature previously warned Victor that if he did not create a mate, he would kill his new wife on their wedding night.

In the novel, Victor dies onboard Walton's ship from exhaustion, and the Creature, who has been tailing him the whole time, declares defeat and heads farther north to create a funeral pyre, seemingly ending its wretched life.

Frankenstein Texts

I. Genesis

CHORUS:

Titan! To thee the strife was given
Between the suffering and the will,
Which torture where they cannot kill;
And the inexorable Heaven,
And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
The ruling principle of Hate,
Which for its pleasure doth create
The things it may annihilate.

*from Prometheus, by George
Gordon (Lord) Byron. 1816*

II. The Letter

ELIZABETH:

Victor! Write to me.

With your silence I see a Fiend in
everyone.

We have our past, we'll have our
future.

This will be our memory.

Write to me, and come back.

*from Frankenstein Opera,
Júlia Canosa i Serra, 2016*

III. The Lab

VICTOR:

Will she have a sense of self, will she
have a future?

Demanding a past?

He has sworn to quit the land of men,
but she has not!

She might refuse to hide. They might
hate each other.

Will she not abhor his equal?

*from Frankenstein Opera,
Júlia Canosa i Serra, 2016*

IV. The Trial

JUSTINE:

I never confessed to murder!
Walking all night I heard a wolf,
circling around me.

Ice rain fell like pebbles,
and lightning with evil flames charred
a nearby tree.

William nowhere near.

Deadened by thunders, I fell asleep,
woke up to the smell of charring
woods.

CHORUS:

In my dreams I heard
a faceless man singing
from the burning tree.

*from Frankenstein Opera,
Júlia Canosa i Serra, 2016*

V. The Body

VICTOR:

Lifeless, inanimate

The murderous mark of my creature
Still on your neck!

No breath on your lips.

Can I behold this and live?

*from Frankenstein Opera,
Júlia Canosa i Serra, 2016*