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Planning music – “Something’s in the air”

By Patrick T. Reardon on Mon., 06/15/2009 –6:13 am.

Tchaikovsky’s 1812 overture recounted Napoleon’s failed invasion of Russia. The opera “Salome” by Richard Strauss got its story from the Bible. One of George Gershwin’s best loved works --- “An American in Paris” -- - is a paean to the City of Light.

Great events, great stories, great emotions have often been the sparks for musical masterpieces.

But plans? How inspiring could reports, documents and blueprints be to a composer?

Well, very inspiring, according to Michael Torke.

“I grew up with a father who was a professional architect,” he says during a telephone interview from his New York City home. “I grew up with the notion that to have a plan for a building was a very exciting thing.”



So, when the Grant Park Music Festival asked him to write an oratorio on Daniel Burnham’s famous words about planning to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Burnham Plan, he didn’t hesitate. Indeed, he found working with Burnham’s words such a kick that he was able to deliver the finished piece eight months ahead of schedule.

“Plans” --- Torke’s five-movement oratorio, a work that is, by turns, lofty, tranquil, rational and even lyrically mathematical --- will have its world premiere this weekend (June 19-20) at the free Grant Park Music Festival in the Jay Pritzker Pavilion.

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ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It’s rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [\[MORE\]](#)

The program, which includes Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, begins at 6:30 p.m. Friday and 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

The Burnham quote

For his text, Torke used Burnham's oft-quoted five-sentence planning manifesto:

"Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die, but long after we are gone will be a living thing, asserting itself with ever-growing insistency. Remember that our sons and grandsons are going to do things that would stagger us. Let your watchword be order and your beacon beauty."

These words embody the Plan of Chicago, even though they appear nowhere in the document. (In fact, they never appeared in print in Burnham's lifetime, but certainly capture his spirit.)

At first, Torke says, he worried that Burnham's words might seem too Victorian, too old-fashioned for today's audiences. But the more he worked with the text, the more he got caught up in their broad vision --- and its relevance to today.

He saw parallels between Burnham's willingness to think big thoughts and speak bold words and the oratory of President Barack Obama. He also noticed how excited people would get when he'd mention that he was putting the words to music.

"Something's in the air," he says. The idea of making big plans "is speaking to something today."

Artistic philosophy

In his program notes, Torke writes that his own approach to art meshes well with the forward-looking, optimistic Burnham (and, in passing, with Abraham Lincoln).

"(A)rt can either reflect the squalor, pain and suffering of human existence, or it can appeal to the 'better angels of our nature,' and in that transcendence raise the spirits of man," he writes. "I believe firmly in the second choice."

During the interview, the conversation turns to a comparison of Burnham and that other great American city-shaper, Robert Moses. The subject of Robert Caro's masterful biography "The Power Broker," Moses transformed New York and its suburbs through massive public works projects over the course of a half-century career.

Burnham, working as part of a large group of planners, succeeded through the power of his ideas. Despite his death in 1912, three years after the Plan's publication, city officials and everyday Chicagoans were so caught up in his vision that they brought many of the Plan's recommendations into existence.

By contrast, Moses, after discovering ways to attach to himself unprecedented powers, acted by fiat, regardless of what others wanted.

"Burnham did it better," Torke says. "He was a true artist. Moses was a politician."