

AIRS AND ANGELS

Music's bewitching power has always had a role in ritual, sorcery and the supernatural. In the light of one of this year's Proms themes, *Joscelyn Godwin* explores the link between music and magic

To a visitor from another planet, an orchestral concert must appear as one of the oddest of human activities. Whatever are the natives up to? They seem to be performing a kind of ritual. There's a chief celebrant and a host of acolytes, who use precision instruments to set the air in a certain vibratory motion. The other participants are more passive, but occasionally beat their hands together. Is this a scientific procedure, or is it to be classed with superstition and sorcery?

It is difficult even for us to answer this question, for music is the most magical of all the arts. It works with an intangible substance to achieve effects that writers and painters can only envy. It transcends the barriers of language, and is indifferent to religious belief. Music conjures up imaginary beings and prophetic voices, who seem to speak with a truer voice than mere words.

'Magic' and 'sorcery' may be nothing but metaphors today, but they were deadly serious in the late Renaissance, the period in which John Harle's new opera *Angel Magick* is set. In 1601, Giordano Bruno was burned in Rome for propagating a pagan magical philosophy. Not long before, John Dee and Edward Kelly held their famous séances in Bohemia. They performed strict rituals and used peculiar instruments – sigils and scrying mirrors. Angels revealed an unknown, Enochian language to them, and much occult lore, though not the secret of alchemical transmutation which they desired. Bruno, Dee and Kelly all appear in *Angel Magick*, along with the poets Spenser and

Sidney, and Queen Elizabeth I. Harle's score is a suitably alchemical marriage of opposites: classical, jazz and rock elements, live and recorded sounds, modern equal temperament and the mean-tone tuning of 1600.

David Pountney's libretto for *Angel Magick* treats these historical personages in time-honoured operatic fashion. Like Handel's *Julius Caesar* or Rameau's *Zoroastre*, the Renaissance magi are excuses for fantasies that never happened, but which precipitate marvellous music. Rameau's opera *Zoroastre* (1749, revised 1756) uses the Persian prophet in two ways. He is the stock deposed king of Baroque drama, who must regain his kingdom and save the woman he loves. But he is also a magician, devoted to the God of Light, whereas his political and amorous rival is an initiate of the God of Darkness.

We value this rarely-performed opera for Rameau's incessant musical invention, especially in the crowd scenes and dances. We're told in the learned libretto that 'the ancients had no religious rites without dance', and neither does this opera. But in its time, *Zoroastre* was most admired for its stage effects, for which the rituals of black and white magic offered much scope. It must have been like the blockbuster films of today, giving audiences the chance to see and hear things that burst the boundaries of the possible.

The Russian Ballet apparently had a similar effect on its audiences in the years before the First World War. Stravinsky's first ballet score, *The Firebird*, draws on a Russian fairy-tale world fully as exotic as Zoroaster's Persia. It uses the same theme ➤

Left
GOOD AND EVIL: THE
DEVIL TEMPTING A
YOUNG WOMAN. BY
ANDRÉ JACQUES
VICTOR ORSEL
(1795–1850)

of a supernatural confrontation between good and evil powers, with good triumphant at the end. In 1909 Stravinsky could still follow a tradition of harmonic symbolism that dated back to long before Rameau: he represented the good Prince and Princesses by diatonicism, the evil magician Kashchey by chromaticism and discord. But already the Firebird, a mercurial creature who is the catalyst of the action, inhabits a virtually atonal zone where the distinctions become irrelevant.

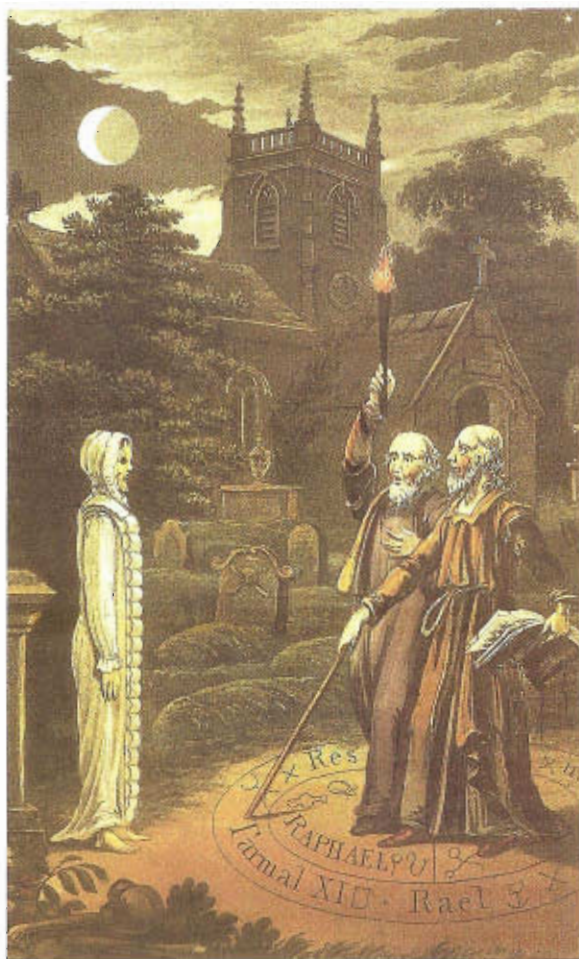
Inventiveness in terms of sound is the common musical thread that joins this season's many works of magical inspiration. Rameau's is the most primitive (though not the least exciting), simply because the orchestra of the 1750s was not the colourful instrument it would later become. The first master of orchestral colour in the modern sense was Berlioz, and his first masterpiece the 'Episodes in the Life of an Artist' or *Symphonie fantastique* (1830). This semi-autobiographical had trip culminates in the black magic of the Witches' Sabbath, depicted by the first of the monster orchestras. Berlioz was a sceptic and rationalist who believed neither in witches nor in the apotropaic virtue of Christian chanting. But he probably knew the effects of drugs, and he certainly understood the power of archetypes. The confrontation of the *Dies irae* chant and the witches' dance in the finale of the symphony draws its energy from these symbols, once universal in European consciousness.

The same duality rules Berlioz's 'dramatic legend' *The Damnation of Faust* (1845). It borrows from Goethe for its poetry, but not for its story, which owes more to Marlowe's dire vision: Mephistopheles gets Faust in the end. The Romantic artist, free from terror of the theologians' Hell, relished every strong emotion as a door to the Sublime. In both works Berlioz makes the evil side musically more attractive than the good. Everyone thrills to Faust's blasphemous invocation of Nature, his abduction by Mephistopheles, his reception by the choir of devils, who seem to be speaking John Dee's Enochian language. We revel with Berlioz in the new, chromatic brass instruments, the multiply-divided



Left
THE QUEEN OF THE
NIGHT FROM *THE
MAGIC FLUTE*.
SKETCH (1818) BY
SIMON OSAGLIO

Right
EDWARD KELLY AND
JOHN DEE RAISING A
GHOST

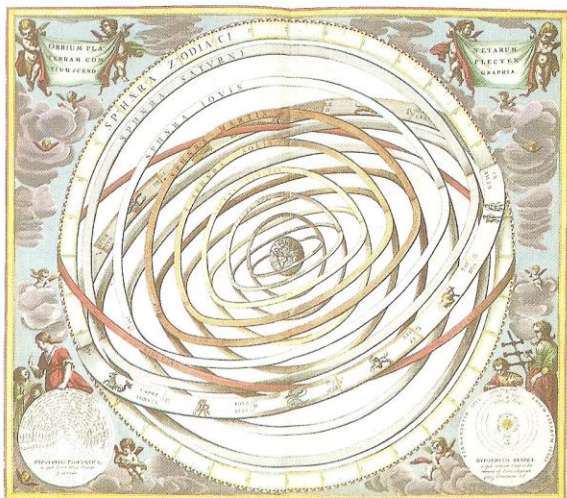


strings, the rare woodwind sounds, the percussion effects.

The magic of Dukas's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1897) is even less serious. A poem of Goethe is again the source, and beyond that the same rich vein of Germanic folklore as produced *Doctor Faustus*. Blessed are those who can hear it without memories of Disney's wide-eyed rodent! Better to spurn all imagery and listen to the harmonies and the orchestral colouring, subtle as an Impressionist painting.

Since almost nothing is known about the real Zoroaster, the Persian magus has served as a useful persona for exotic ideas. He showed up as Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, and a century later as the mouthpiece for Friedrich Nietzsche's indictment of civilisation, *Also sprach Zarathustra* ("Thus Spake Zarathustra"). This was still new and rather shocking when Richard Strauss illustrated it in 1896 with his tone-poem. Just as Berlioz's *Symphonic* had proved that there was still life after Beethoven, Strauss refused to be cowed by the shadow of Wagner. With all the confidence of youth, he identified himself with Nietzsche's hero, if not with the *Übermensch*, the Superman of an optimistic future that has long turned sour. We have heard the opening bars far too often out of context, but there is much more to this symphonic-scale work. The cosmic waltz at the end, with its jubilant horns and woodwind filigree, is one of the happiest consequences of Nietzschean philosophy.

Nietzsche's philosophy also underlies Szymanowski's opera *King Roger*, written in 1918–24. None of the pieces I have mentioned has a more sustainedly magical atmosphere. Szymanowski gathered local colour and inspiration on a voyage to Sicily and Tunisia. He blends the homoerotic figure of young Dionysus with the exoticism of the Arab world, to create 'Pastusz', the Shepherd, who is Dionysus incarnate. The Shepherd sidles into the Medieval court of King Roger of Sicily to preach a subversive pantheism totally at odds with the Christianity of the Orthodox church. Queen Roxana is readily seduced by the new, or rather the old religion. Her soprano role is one of the glories



of twentieth-century opera, with its unforgettable floating entrances and its long cantilenas over rich, saturated harmonies. Act 2 centres on a Dionysian orgy that seems to carry on, musically, where *The Firebird* left off, and to leave the way wide open for Varèse.

According to Nietzsche, the sculpture and architecture of ancient Greece reflected the rational sun-god Apollo, whereas drama and music were ruled by Dionysus. Szymanowski's opera shows Dionysus enchanting the world through his song. In other operas based on the power of music, such as *Orfeo*, *The Magic Flute* and *The Mastersingers*, music serves only the bright, Apollonian forces. But to the Nietzschean, and for that matter to the Freudian and the Jungian, the dark side is no longer simplistically classed as 'evil'. The night is as vital as the day. In *King Roger*, Szymanowski takes the next logical step after Berlioz, who made the Dionysian side so attractive: he sanctifies it.

By the time he reached Act 3, Szymanowski had grown out of the one-sided Dionysian ideals he had shared with his librettist. He now decided to have King Roger end the opera with an invocation to Apollo. Thus Nietzsche's twin forces are

both acknowledged. The King becomes the image of the new man, a slave to neither side.

These works, which wear their magical or supernatural affiliations openly, serve as a reminder of the mysterious power of all music. Nowhere is this more keenly felt than at the live concert, which against all odds has not yet been made redundant by technology. As in John Dee's magick, the ritual has to be done exactly right if the angel is to appear and speak to us. But we do not have to believe in that, or in anything else, to feel transformed by it. *

(See also *Proms Premieres*, page 128; Rameau's 'Zoroastre', page 94; and Szymanowski, page 72)

Joscelyn Godwin is the author of Harmonies of Heaven and Earth, Music and the Occult, and other books on music and esotericism. He is Professor of Music at Colgate University, New York State.

Magic in Music at the Proms

George Benjamin Sometime Voices	Prom 40
Berlioz The Damnation of Faust	Prom 1
Berlioz Symphonie fantastique	Prom 12
Dukas The Sorcerer's Apprentice	Prom 30
John Harle Angel Magick	Prom 6
Prokofiev Cinderella – excerpts	Prom 55
Rameau Zoroastre	Prom 2
Strauss Also sprach Zarathustra	Prom 30
Stravinsky The Firebird	Prom 56
Szymanowski King Roger	Prom 3
Szymanowski Songs of a Fairy-Tale Princess	Prom 71
Judith Weir Storm	Prom 36

Above Left
PLANETARY ORBITS
(1660-61), BY
ANDREAS CELLARIUS