

CS 43 Transcript

[00:00:00] I would like to compose this, but I have no daughter. That's what a French composer, Maurice Ravel, told writer Colette when she sent him a libretto titled Entertainments for My Daughter.

[00:00:10] They quickly renamed the piece, L'enfant et les Sortilège - the child and the spell's.

[00:00:20] We'll just call it l'enfant. I'm Colleen Phelps and this is classically speaking.

[00:00:41] L'enfant is a bit of a fairy tale where after a child has a tantrum, objects in his room come to life and nobody writes that kind of whimsy, like early 20th century French composer Maurice Ravel. Each of those objects and the animals in the child's yard get their own song to sing, which meant that by programming this piece, Vanderbilt Opera Theater was able to give fun and exciting roles to every student who wanted to join. So opera, big stage lights, costumes, audience and a big pivot for a pandemic.

[00:01:13] But then we realized we're not going to be able to do it any singing in person. So we switched ideas in like April.

[00:01:20] That's music director Jennifer McGuire, along with stage director Gayle Shea.

[00:01:23] We spent the summer trying to find an animator, which was a tremendous education in this world.

[00:01:30] Yes, an animator. The team put together what was possibly Nashville's most innovative classical music project of 20/20, an animated rendition of l'enfant.

[00:01:40] So it was very quick. Like once we decided to do it, we got to work.

[00:01:44] We thought about using students, but students were too busy and also completely overwhelmed with COVID by that point.

[00:01:49] The team eventually found the perfect artist right here in Nashville, Kevin Thornton.

[00:01:54] Kevin's a filmmaker, actor, director. He's a very, I think, a typical Nashville and artist. You know, he does multiple things. Fortunately, he was willing to try this project and amazingly delivered it by December. It's kind of miraculous,

[00:02:13] an opera about a child, a fantasy that's kind of beauty And the Beast meets problem child with an avant garde French quality. sounds tricky, but Thornton knew just what to do with it.

[00:02:26] Taking a story like this and creating animated images around it lends itself to becoming childlike. You know, is not something I necessarily was trying for. It just sort of organically happened. I think

[00:02:41] Thornton took his model from a great, well known piece of animation that frequently leaned into the bizarre.

[00:02:48] I kept going back to Sesame Street. They constantly used wildly different types of animation in these little segments that were all music focused. Even though Sesame Street animations were a lot of times were really abstract, you know, and it's more like paint splatters and, you know, things dancing with with the music in a non literal way.

[00:03:23] music director McGuire had a much more practical inspiration for the character of the child.

[00:03:29] Oh, well, yes, as a mother, I saw my own son and this child. Absolutely. And the way we George did a back story on her character and the child in her mind, the child was eight and my son is eight. And so a lot of it was very close to home. I've had some of the same conversations with my son. You haven't done your homework. You haven't picked up your clothes. Why not? And then, you know, he never ripped up the wallpaper, I will say.

[00:04:06] Stage director Gail Shay agreed

[00:04:08] The child doesn't understand why all these things are happening until way toward the end of the opera and definitely gets bored with things really quickly.

[00:04:32] With his very short window of time. He came up with a way to animate an entire opera with a fun artsy, dare I say, Nashville vibe using technology that was available.

[00:04:43] I had to do a lot of creative problem solving to come up with anything, really. But I, I definitely made an effort to make the imagery move with the music. And a lot of times I just sort of pulled it from a spontaneous place, maybe even an abstract place. I feel like I used the word abstract a lot when I was bouncing ideas off of off of the production team.

[00:05:08] I wish I could describe Thorntons animation to you, but I've never seen anything like it. Faces are captured and then filtered to blend in with drawings as all of the stuff around the child comes to life. It's gritty and unsettling, but it's also fantastic and beautiful thought and brought all these still objects to life in a way that leaves you as surprised as the child,

[00:05:34] huh?

[00:05:41] So this is the chair and it's a cartoon chair, but it's got a live action, human face on it and it all fits together and the face is so expressive.

[00:05:57] The thing to listen for is how the music changes with each of the characters who come to life. and or we can finally hear like the animals. It's pretty brilliant, actually, in how it represents the personality of each of these inanimate objects. For instance, the clock that the child has destroyed. So it can't tell time anymore. Think of the frenetic ness of that of this clock. You can just see in your mind's eye and also in the animation. But you can see that this clock is so anxious that time is ticking with not really ticking. Time is ticking by and he can't tell you what time it is. I'm sure he could see about its audience or does and then the the libretto jumps in there with this very profound if he hadn't destroyed me, then maybe people wouldn't have died because time would have would have gone differently. I would have marked the time differently. So I think for me, that's the as a director, that is certainly the thing. Originally thinking about it on stage, I hooked into. It goes by so quickly that you have to pay attention to it. Otherwise you miss some of it, but you won't get bored.

No one will get bored. This is this is not the same music all the way through. It changes constantly, constantly, because it's like a child's attention span. Truly.

[00:07:49] By the 1920s, European music had some rough edges and a tendency toward experimentation, especially as composers dealt with the emotional impact of the First World War. But Ravel described his music for long fall as melody melody nothing but melody.

[00:08:06] I would agree that the orchestration is very melodic. I think that's some of the singing isn't. I think that a lot of the singing is very speech like like, for instance, the mother. I mean, you know, she's just reprimanding the child with the fire, I would say is pretty melodic. So that's one thing that stands out to me. And then, of course, the final ensemble at the end, like once after playing that or coaching it, it would be in my head just four hours on.

[00:08:56] Oh, it's just I would say it's stickier than I thought it was going to be in terms of of the vocal parts

[00:09:05] by sticky Shay means that it's memorable. It sticks in your mind indefinitely and snippets.

[00:09:15] And definitely in this in the way we did it, which is listening to the tracks over and over and over again to mix them. And so performances got really stuck in my head, particularly the the the numbers when the numbers come to life and the old man take. The tick, tick, tick that the numbers do just I could not get that scene. That scene was very sticky to me.

[00:09:52] Each of those individual charming pieces has to be portrayed in this case by a college student. What was it like to be a singer in this animated production? Find out after the break.

[00:11:40] L'enfant, this little fairy tale of an opera, came after one of the darkest periods in European history. Composer Maurice Ravel was already famous by the time World War One started, but he still took on the role of a truck driver on the front line. Of course, he was deeply affected by the experience. France lost over a million people to the war and what Ravel saw on the front lines left him vehemently opposed to the war's entire cause. Ravel's refusal to condemn German composers left his own music briefly blacklisted in France. While, he had written more directly about the war, such as his memorial to lost friends, this piece, Les Tombeau de Couperin, the effect was noticeable in other works like La Valse and even into l'enfant. After a worldwide tantrum, it seemed Europe was still picking up the pieces from the destruction, just like the objects and animals have to thanks to the child. The Vanderbilt students internalized this when Gayle Shay assigned them to write their own character descriptions for their roles. Here, Rachael Bell gives us a reading of her description of the squirrel who she officially named Nutters.

[00:12:55] I'm tough, resourceful and clever, and I never leave a squirrel behind except for myself, when that kid showed up, I'm four years old and I have two parents and six siblings, four brothers and two sisters. My parents always wanted a big family. Although I'm second oldest, I still hold a lot of responsibility in my family. And for my pack, they make me leader because I'm the only one for my whole family tree to get caught and break free. Sadly, my uncle wasn't so lucky. We lost him to hunters. And we lost my grandma Jane to a gardener's weed whacker two Christmases ago. It's a rough world out here for

some squirrels. People think you're adorable until they get too close, wear protective. They get scared and attack. It's an ordeal. We live in a birch tree near the river where we've gone almost every day for water and gathering food for winter. It's actually not bad. Before you meet me, I'm trapped in the dumb kids cage, but I guess you meant before that. Well, before you meet me in the story, I get a little greedy. I smelled cheese and bread coming from down the road. And I want to surprise my family that I know is a stupid kids trap. He's been staring at me, banging on his cage for hours and I'm claustrophobic. Don't you dare tell the others I said that, especially Butters. I'd never hear the end of it. For me, though, the changing point in this whole story is when I hurt my paw on the cage and the kid, dumb little kid, just didn't hesitate to wrap up my head and bandages.

[00:15:05] Nutters has some battle scars. Carlos Ehrens takes on the Frogs speech pattern and his character description as the frog considers the squirrels warning,

[00:15:16] I am heedless, jovial and chirpy. I am a green frog with seven brown spots on my back. I live in a small pond in the center of the forest. I resent my family for keeping me in the pond for so long and I wish I could be free and hop around wherever I please. I don't plan on telling them because I do not want to have a confrontation with them. I do not understand the child and the threat at them scares me. I'm trying to figure out what the child means for me and if I can trust them or not.

[00:16:09] The postwar existential crisis is even evident in this description of the tree from Preston Rogers, Rogers took inspiration from another creative mind that fought in World War One, J.R. Tolkien.

[00:16:23] My name is Dwarf's Spur, a 400 year old tree nestled in a thick forest in northern France. I'm unsure of who my parents are or where, but my fellow trees are all the family I need. I've lived here all my life and I'm very fortunate to live somewhere far removed from society. Half of our days are spent being on the lookout for that beast of a child. I myself am a fair share of wounds from this blade. Today we saw the child roaming the forest much later than usual. He seemed in a panic and we took this as a chance to stand up for ourselves and our confrontation. We groaned in our pain that he had inflicted upon us. We trees are all family to each other. We all try our best to be open and honest. However, I sometimes dread what my life has become. Most days I bask in the warm sunlight or stand in or out of the chaotic beauty of a thunderstorm. Other times I ask myself, what if what if I could roam this forest? What if I were an animal free from these roots? I should be more honest with my peers, but I fear sharing this anxiety will just lead the others to that same dark place.

[00:18:18] Yes, these characters are all cute, but under the whimsy lies the postwar bitterness out of that sadness and anger. The production drew a parallel to today. All of these students participating have lost something in the last year.

[00:18:34] It seemed like a storybook idea, but that the first half would be very dark in terms of the particularly the background imagery at the beginning of the animated film.

[00:18:44] There's a fairly relatable live action sequence set today, a singer trying to learn a role like its pre pandemic, but without being able to go indoors.

[00:18:54] She falls asleep. And in comes the animation young woman who had the child, Jorja Peak had. That was her back story that this child's father had been killed in World War One. And that's why he was a bad child. In terms of his behavior, he was acting out.

We wanted to, I guess, insert the idea that the frustration of every artist, particularly those of us who are aerosolize, who can't do that anymore in the final scene, is outside. So that shot of her, that that scene of her in the beginning where she's coming to the park and she's got her score and she's working on her score and is just frustrated because she can't really seem there either. She can't. She's just just not working the way she wants to. She falls asleep and, you know, the audience can decide whether this opera is her dream or not.

[00:19:49] So the students, it's got to be so different for a student to not like be with the big group and be laughing about the characters or pretending to be a character, trying on their costumes together, like a lot of the sort of camaraderie, things that go with being in an opera, aren't there? So how did the students take to the project?

[00:20:11] At first they were really excited about it. Once we got to the school and then they realized everything they were going to have to do and learning to live in the dorms. And with all the COGAT protocols, I think they started to get really stressed out about it. And once it was recorded, the technology is so great, but it just does things. And you don't understand. I'd be putting them on my hard drive or getting ready to edit it. And then part like just a part of the recording would be missing. So I'd call them and say, you need to come do this again. So then they were frustrated. But then once they realized it's all done, we're sending it to the animator. They were excited again, gotten better.

[00:20:58] Come on, were the students do you think they were in tune to the professional value of the experience? Voiceover work probably was something that they really almost universally felt was useful. And we I think we did a strong sell of it because we wanted them to partake in it. But we also wanted them to know we're really excited about it and we're really working hard for you to have an experience that's going to be useful to you in some way when you get out of here, and that we're not just marking time, that we're not just here putting in our hours so that, you know, we get through this.

[00:21:53] It's worth noting, as we all watch vaccine trackers and countdown to the day that the world feels re-opened, Gail Shay is right. The artists of the world haven't been marking time. They've been pivoting, creating, learning like crazy, working together and continuing to keep you entertained, thinking and feeling. Course, once again, I must say, Vanderbilt Opera Theater's entire production of L'enfant is the most wild and innovative classical music event of these pandemic times, you can still watch it online. We'll link to it in the show. Notes at Nashville Classical Radio dot org. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio, the show is edited by Anita Bug and mastered by Carl Pedersen. I'm Colleen Phelps. Find playlists for every episode of Classically Speaking on Spotify. And while you're there, give the show a rating. This is the best way to help get the word out that you've got a backstage pass to classical music, classically speaking.