

UNHALLOWED EVE

An American Composer's Perspective on Elfman, Frank, Berlioz, Tan & Revueltas

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Tonight's Plano Symphony Orchestra Halloween concert features programmatic music of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Originally a religious holiday, marking the eve of the Christian All Saints Day, Halloween in the U.S. is now mostly an autumnal occasion for merry making with candy, licorice ice cream and displays of pumpkins, cobwebs and spooky images of death and the supernatural. On an evening of music about the dead, it is refreshing to see that, of the five composers to be heard, three are living Americans.

I.

Daniel Elfman (born 1953) is an American composer, singer and instrumentalist, best known for his scores for television and movies plus numerous popular songs. Of his 100+ film scores, 20 of them have been in collaboration with film maker Tim Burton. He has received four Oscar nominations, three Emmy Awards, a Grammy, a Disney Legend Award, the Max Steiner Film Music Achievement Award and the Society of Composers & Lyricists Lifetime Achievement Award.

Tonight's concert begins with an orchestral suite drawn from Elfman's score for the 1993 stop-motion animated musical fantasy film *Nightmare before Christmas*. The convoluted story, based on a poem by Tim Burton, centers around a "Pumpkin King" who seeks to give Halloween and its monsters greater importance than the holiday of Christmas. He tries to take the place of the benevolent Santa as the holiday's central image, and, in one episode, he provides "Sandy Claws" with a sleigh drawn by skeletal reindeer. At the end, however, Santa and the Pumpkin King join forces and celebrate Christmas together with Halloween trappings. The music consists of a medley of themes from the film orchestrated in sweeping Hollywood style with playful evocations of the ancient Gregorian *Dies Ire* chant for the dead, Broadway's *Fiddler on the Roof* and the mock-sinister marches of Kurt Weill.

II.

Gabriela Lena Frank (born 1972) is an American pianist and composer of Peruvian descent. She is a performing member of YoYo Ma's "Silk Road" ensemble, and her music has been performed by major orchestras and festivals, including the Boston, San Francisco, Atlanta Symphonies and the Cleveland Orchestra. She is published by G. Schirmer (Wise Music), and she has held the position of Composer-in-Residence with

Chicago Symphony, for whom she composed her *Picaflor: A Future Myth*, for which she received the 2026 Pulitzer Prize.

For her 27-minute 2012 *Requiem for a Magical America*, Frank provides the following commentary: “As one of the most important holidays in Latin America, El Día de los Muertos is a yearly celebration of the dead...Coinciding with All Souls’ Day, this festival is an example of ‘folk Catholicism,’ a blending of post-Conquest and pre-Conquest religious beliefs. As a folk requiem, this work is in ten movements, tracing one village’s celebration of their own deceased.

I. Preludio: Canto Religioso (Prelude: Religious Song): Church bells and organ music quietly set the opening scene...

II. Sacando a los Espíritus Malos (Driving Away the Evil Spirits “...Approaching from a distance and sweeping through the village, young men run around banging pots and pans in order to drive away bad spirits...

III. Danza del Pueblo (Village Dance): In this folkloric dance, we are introduced to the spirit and culture of the village as they prepare for the arrival of the dead -- Cooking favorite dishes, preparing altars with marigolds and candy and hosting lively dance and music performances.

IV. Calaveras (Skeletons/Satiric Verses): One of the hallmarks of El Día de Los Muertos is the comical depiction of skeletal figures...Skeletal policemen police the streets, skeletal bakers bake bread, and skeletal stylists dress hair. ‘Calaveras’ also refers to satiric verses that the living make up, mocking their deceased...In this way, mischief and humor are injected into an otherwise serious holiday.

V. La Santísima Muerte (Madame Saint Death): Viewed as a sort of anti-Virgin Mary, La Santísima Muerte is often depicted as a skeletal woman in a religious shawl. In this scene, mourning widows dance in homage to the saint and to the memory of the deceased.

VI. El Cementerio (The Cemetery): At night, the villagers proceed to the town cemetery to set up their nocturnal vigil, awaiting the arrival of the spirits of the deceased. Bats from the underworld can be heard escaping as the spirits begin to stir.

VII. La Llegada de los Muertos (The Arrival of the Dead): In trance-like music, the spirits arrive as thunder rumbles in the distance. They are greeted by the living.

VIII. Almas Perdidas (Lost Souls): The unbaptised spirits and those who died from violent deaths arrive. They are decidedly disturbed spirits who are unable to find peace in the afterlife.

IX. Danza del Guerrero Precolombino (Dance of the Pre-Columbian Warrior): Out of the unrest of the previous movement emerges the defiant spirit of a warrior from pre-Columbian times...He is finally driven away by the clangor of the pots and pans beaten at the hands of the villagers as the sun dawns.

X. Epílogo: Canto Religioso: As the last of the spirits retreat, the villagers return to church to sing a final prayer."

III.

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) was the most important French composer of his time. The post-Beethoven generation of composers carried Beethoven's legacy in two different directions. "Classical Romantics," such as Schubert, Brahms and Schumann, wrote in the symphonic tradition of absolute music in standard Classical forms, such as variations, rondos and sonatas. "Romantic Romantics," such as Wagner and Liszt, on the other hand, followed the lead of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* with programmatic music that told a story, and they worked in freer forms. Berlioz was a "Romantic Romantic." His entire musical output is based either on texts or scenarios.

Berlioz enjoyed his status as a bad-boy musical revolutionary, and he was often at odds with his critics. The premiere of Berlioz' *Requiem* was in an outdoor stadium the day after a stock show. One critic took the cheap shot of attributing the smell not to the livestock, but to Berlioz' music. Berlioz, however, was confident of his place in history; on his deathbed, he uttered "At last, they are going to play my music." Berlioz was also a gifted writer of words, and his witty *Evenings with the Orchestra* and monumental *Treatise on Orchestration* continue to be required reading for musicians.

Berlioz' 1830 programmatic *Symphonie Fantastique*, Op. 14 bears the subtitle of "Episode in the Life of an Artist in Five Sections." Brilliantly orchestrated, it is the composer's signature masterpiece, and it is his most often-performed work. Following Beethoven's model in his *Pastoral Symphony*, Berlioz wrote five movements. They tell the story of a young artist who falls in love with a beautiful woman, fails to win her hand, becomes addicted to opium and has wild horrific visions induced by a combination of the opium and his despair. Berlioz' own life parallels his symphony in that he actually did fall in love with an Irish actress named Harriet Smithson, but she refused even to meet him. And he did take opium, mostly for toothaches, which did give him fantastic visions. In real life, however, there was a happy ending in that after the actress relented by meeting Berlioz, she soon agreed to marry him.

In all five movements, there is a short, soaring recurring theme (or *idée fixe*) that represents the unattainable object of his desire. In the first movement, the artist sees the adored one and, as Berlioz wrote in his notes, "experiences unprovoked joy, to that of a delirious passion, with its movements of fury, jealousy, returns of tenderness, tears, and religious consolations." Next, the artist glimpses "the one" at a ball and is, again,

carried away by passion. The third movement is a quiet pastoral scene in which the artist tries to forget his loved one, but the *idée fixe* returns, and the movement ends with menacing thunder.

Tonight, we will hear only the last two movements. About the fourth movement Berlioz writes: "Having grown sure that his love is unappreciated, the artist poisons himself with opium...He dreams that he has killed the one he loved, that he is condemned, that he is being led to execution, and that he is witnessing his own guillotining...At the end of the march, the first four bars of the *idée fixe* reappear like a last thought of love interrupted by the fatal blow." After the blade falls, there is an orchestral cheer depicting the crowd's glee.

Of the finale, the composer writes, "He sees himself at a [witches'] sabbath, in the middle of a horrible troop of ghosts, sorcerers, and monsters of all kinds...The beloved melody reappears again, but it has lost its character of nobility and timidity; it is no more than a dance tune – ignoble, trivial and grotesque... She joins in the diabolical orgy...in a witches' round dance and a burlesque parody of the *Dies Irae*."

IV.

Tan Dun (born 1957) is a Chinese-born American composer. His catalogue includes operas such as *Marco Polo* and *The First Emperor*, film scores such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, numerous orchestral, vocal and chamber works and compositions for mixed media, including film interacting with live music. His music is characterized by merging Chinese and Western musical traditions, and it is regularly performed by leading orchestras and festivals, including the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony and the Metropolitan Opera. Tan's publisher is G. Schirmer (Wise Music), and he is the recipient of many awards, including a Grammy Award, an Oscar, the Grawemeyer Award, the Bach Prize, the Shostakovich Award and, most recently, Italy's Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement. He serves as Dean of the Bard College Conservatory of Music.

Like the *Revueltas* work which follows it, Tan Dun's *Contrabass Concerto: Wolf Totem* (2015) is not about death, but it provides a glimpse into an exotic world beyond our own. The composer based his score on the Chinese novel *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong. According to the Schirmer website, the novel was "written as a period epic novel and fable for modern days." It "depicts the dying culture of the Mongols – the ancestors of the Mongol hordes who at one time terrorized the world – and the parallel extinction of the animal they believe to be sacred: the fierce and otherworldly Mongolian wolf. The symbol of the Mongolian wolf and its life in the grasslands for Tan Dun is a mirror of the human spirit and our relationship to the natural world...Notably, Tan Dun employs fingering techniques in the string writing and rhythmic gestures...adapted from the styles of ancient Mongolian Horse Fiddle playing."

There are three movements. The concerto opens with high, eerie bass harmonics and Tibetan singing bowls as they set a quiet and lonely scene depicting the cold Mongolian wilds. Gradually, there emerges a musical image of running wolves and wild horses galloping more and more vigorously across the plains.

The second movement is lyrical, featuring the bass singing in its upper, cello-like register. The Schirmer notes liken the music to “the loneliness of a young wolf missing its mother; missing the sky and grasslands of its home.”

In the final movement, the “Lone Ranger” *William Tell*-like rhythms return to evoke galloping horses. Curiously, there are hints of American cowboy music because many traditional songs of the Western plains have their roots in the Chinese pentatonic scale (found in the intervals of the piano’s black keys). Between the galloping episodes, there are ample opportunities for the solo bass to howl with virtuoso passage work, and, together, they drive the work to a stirring conclusion.

V.

Silvestre Revueltas (1899-1940) was one of Mexico’s most significant composers. Inspired by Aaron Copland’s example of American nationalism in concert music, he joined his colleague Carlos Chávez in developing a musical language that conveyed a distinctive Mexican identity. Like Chávez, Revueltas incorporated traditional Mexican folk subjects and musical idioms along with distinctive Aztec-inspired motifs and percussion sounds in his music. The two composers were musical soulmates of their contemporaries Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in the visual arts in that they celebrated the Mexican tradition for an international audience. Revueltas was also a violinist and a conductor. He gained wide professional recognition, but his life was cut short by poverty and alcoholism, and he died in Mexico City at the age of 40.

In 1939, Revueltas composed the score for a film called *Noche de los Mayas* (Night of the Mayas). It showed footage of Mayan ruins, and it had a loose story line about a group of Mayans living with their original pre-Columbian traditions and coming to grips with the modern world. After Revueltas’ death, his colleague José Yves Limantour arranged Revueltas’ cues into a suite, the last movement of which is a theme and variations titled “Noche del Encantamiento” (Night of Enchantment). The full orchestra announces the theme, which instantly casts its spell. Throughout the work, an army of percussionists plays a colorful variety of Latin-American percussion instruments. The orchestration is masterly, with prominent brass parts including horns in their extreme high register. One notable pre-Columbian touch is the use of an actual conch shell, blown as if it were a horn. Each variation brings a new, wildly shifting meter as the music continually blazes forward, always with percussion in the foreground. At the end, Revueltas combines all of his rhythms in a breathtaking contrapuntal layer cake which, like Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, is sure to raise the roof of any concert hall.

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