



FAIR LANE FESTIVAL



THE BURNING FIERY FURNACE

The Second Parable for Church Performance

By BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Text by WILLIAM PLOMER

THURSDAY EVENING, JULY 6, 1967, AT 8:30

FAIR LANE, DEARBORN CAMPUS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Characters

The Abbot, Twelve Monks, Four Acolytes and Eight Lay Brothers who make up the cast of the Parable

- Nebuchadnezzar ANDREA VELIS
- The Astrologer (Abbot) EDWARD PIERSON
- Ananias WILLIAM METCALF
- Misael JOHN LANKSTON
- Azarias ARA BERBERIAN
- The Herald and Leader of the Courtiers DAVID FORSSEN
- The Chorus of Courtiers William Caniff, Richard Christopher,
Richard Eikenberry, David Forssen, Seth McCoy,
Neil Raber, Richard Shadley, Richard Vogt
- Four Assistants (including Angel, Tumbler, Entertainers, Pages, etc.)
Steven Chall, Douglas Hughes, Patrick Malone, Charles Nutile
- The Instrumentalists (Lay Brothers) Arthur Granick, *viola*;
James Brennand, *bass*; John Wion, *flute*; William Brown, *horn*;
Raymond DesRoches, *percussion**; Francesca Corsi, *harp*;
Robert Hauck, *alto trombone*; Julius Rudel, *organ*

* Small untuned drums, anvil (small untuned steel plate), two tuned wood blocks, portable glockenspiel, Babylonian drum, multiple whip

This performance is made possible with the support of the New York State Council on the Arts.

SIXTH PROGRAM

1967 FAIR LANE FESTIVAL

COMPLETE SERIES 3571

89th Season of University Musical Society Presentations

Twenty-sixth program in the Sesquicentennial Year of The University of Michigan

THE BURNING FIERY FURNACE

Second Parable for Church Performance, Op. 77

PROGRAM NOTES

Britten's first Parable for Church Performance, *Curlew River*, was composed in 1964. The libretto, by William Plomer, used as its basis a Japanese Noh play; but the original drama *Sumidagawa* was re-conceived in the terms of a medieval English miracle play, with a band of Monks presenting the Parable—the Mystery—before a Church audience.

For his new Parable, *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, the composition of which was completed in April, 1966, William Plomer is again the librettist; and in conception the work must be regarded as a companion piece to *Curlew River*, similar in style though less severe in mood and incident than the earlier work. The forces involved are almost identical with those of *Curlew River*. The company of Monks—it is again, of course, an all-male cast—furnishes the singers, and the Lay Brothers comprise the instrumentalists. The conductorless chamber group consists of flute (piccolo), horn, alto trombone, viola, double bass, harp, percussion and chamber organ. It is the trombone which is the newcomer to the scene, and Britten, with his peculiar genius for exploiting the unsuspected potentialities of an individual instrument, does not disappoint us on this occasion. Indeed, the unique color of the scoring of *The Burning Fiery Furnace* is associated with the trombone, rather in the same way that the unique color of *Curlew River* is associated with the flute. Britten achieved miracles of color in *Curlew River* with a handful of instruments, but the addition of one instrument to the chamber orchestra in *The Burning Fiery Furnace* opens up a whole wealth of new instrumental colors and instrumental combinations. The nature of the instrumentation, trombone apart, gives us some clues to the location and character of the drama. For example, in addition to an assembly of generally exotic percussion we find small cymbals, a "little harp," and, most revealing of all, a Babylonian drum. And these specific colors are peculiarly appropriate, because the action of the Parable takes place in Babylon in the 6th Century B.C., and is based on the famous story from the Book of Daniel, when the faith of the three young Israelites, Ananias, Misael, and Azarias, is tested by Nebuchadnezzar in the fiery furnace.

Although the libretto has a Biblical source, the treatment of the drama runs on parallel lines with *Curlew River*. Once again the Monks process to the acting area, singing a supremely beautiful plainsong, *Salus aeterna*, which proves, as did *Te lucis ante terminum* in *Curlew River*, to be the main source of the work's musical materials: the formative contours of the plainsong, however much transformed or modified, are present throughout.

After the procession of Monks and Lay Brothers is over, the Abbot (baritone, who also sings the Astrologer) announces the theme of the Parable, the ordeal of the three young men of Israel, brought to Babylon to govern three provinces. As at the comparable point in *Curlew River*, there is now an instrumental interlude, the "robing music," while the Monks assume the costumes of the roles they are to play in the ensuing Parable. The heterophonic texture of the "robing music," built on and about the plainsong, is only one of the many passages in the new work which remind us of the precedents established in *Curlew River*.

The Herald (baritone) proclaims the feast that is to be held in honour of the three youths, and then suitably ceremonious music precedes and accompanies the entry of Nebuchadnezzar (tenor), who re-names the youths in Babylonian style—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—before the feast actually begins (but without the youths, who politely decline to participate).

Their abstention is at first not noticed, because of an entertainment that is given to the guests by two singers (boys' voices) and a tumbler. This delicious, catchy set piece is followed by an angry denunciation of the youths by the Astrologer, who accuses them of insulting Babylonian manners. "When in Babylon, dine as the Babylonians dine," he says. The youths explain that they must abide by "the sacred rules of Israel," and their refusal to compromise their own beliefs is used by the wily Astrologer to whip up hostility against "the foreigners," whose arrival, of course, threatens his own power.

The youths confidently assert their faith (the plainsong, symbol of their faith, is firmly woven into the texture of their music at this point) and calmly await their fate. The Courtiers are ordered to worship an image of gold—those that will not, "shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace." The Courtiers form into a procession, led by the musicians. It is here that the exotic instruments come into their own: we have the Babylonian drum, small cymbals, little harp and glockenspiel, combining with flute, trombone, horn and viola in a fantastic March which is one of the most remarkable inventions in the score. Not only a feat of instrumental imagination, needless to add, but also an astonishing feat of counterpoint: each instrument has its own characteristic theme (or rhythm) and at the climax of the March all the themes are simultaneously combined.

The image of gold appears, but though the Courtiers bow down before it, the youths remain aloof, even throughout the great hymn of Babylonian worship. The Astrologer accuses them again, this time of open rebellion, and Nebuchadnezzar himself—unable to shake their faith—orders the furnace to be heated. The youths are dragged off and cast into it.

But—a miracle! The three young men are standing in the midst of the fire, and there is a fourth figure (a protective angel of God) at their side. This is one of the most graphic moments in the score: Britten's "fire" music, which grows in incandescence as the temperature rises. The flames part to reveal the youths unharmed and singing the Lord's praises from the heart of the furnace, at which point the sudden stillness—the cessation of the "fire" music—is as moving as the brilliant instrumental depiction of the tongues of flame has been exciting. The youths step out, summoned forth by the astonished Nebuchadnezzar, untouched by fire.

The Astrologer is routed and dismissed, Nebuchadnezzar converted, the image of gold falls, and the King, his Courtiers, and the three young men unite in praise of God. The "robing music" returns, but this time the Monks divest themselves of their costumes. The Abbot addresses the congregation and draws the moral: "Gold is tried in the fire, And the mettle of man In the furnace of humiliation." To the opening plainsong, *Salus aeterna*, the Monks process out of the Church. The Parable has been played, the Mystery enacted, and the work ends with a long Amen.

The first performance of *The Burning Fiery Furnace* was at the Caramoor Festival, Katonah, New York, on June 25, 1967. The staff was:

Musical Director	JULIUS RUDEL
Stage Director	BLISS HEBERT
Costume Designer	LLOYD EVANS
Technical Director	DONALD SWINNEY
Choral Director	RICHARD VOGT
Organ	courtesy, Trinity Church, Katonah, N.Y.

The exhibition of paintings on display here at Fair Lane on July 5 and 6 is from The Forsythe Gallery of Ann Arbor:

Chung Che	<i>Hunter</i>	ink
Richard Wilt	<i>Apache Trail #2</i>	acrylic
King Calkins	<i>Poppies</i>	acrylic
William Lewis	<i>Big Red</i>	oil
Carol Summers	<i>Dark Rainbow</i>	wood cut
Alecos Condopoulos	<i>Image I</i>	oil
Milton Kemnitz	<i>Detroit Towers</i>	acrylic
Chet LaMore	<i>Canyon Country at Dusk</i>	oil
Richard Wilt	<i>Antigua</i>	watercolor
Rafael Coronel	<i>Suenos Antiguos VII</i>	oil
Winifred Klaren	<i>Gold Coast</i>	colage
Lee Weiss	<i>Rock Garden</i>	watercolor
Louise J. Nobili	<i>On the Veranda</i>	oil

FAIR LANE FESTIVAL

Dearborn Campus, The University of Michigan

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SATURDAY, JULY 15, 8:30

CORELLI—Concerto Grosso No. 2, F major, Op. 6

MOZART—Concerto for Piano, K. 271

BACH—Concerto for Violin, E major

BRITTEN—Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge