

MUSICAL PRAYER

MARK HILLIARD WILSON

St. James Cathedral Guitarist

Ballet and “Dance of the Blessed Spirits”
from *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762)

Christoph Willibald Gluck
1714–1787
transcribed by Richard Yates

Notes by Mark Hilliard Wilson

When I began preparing today’s program the world outside was a strange orangish hue, with an eerie yellowish tinge. The sun was badly reaching us and when you could see it, it was strange in how the roundness of it cut through the smoke and how brilliantly orange it was. Only two days prior to my preparation I had enjoyed a mild campfire smell, and you could see the mountains on the Olympic peninsula some 60 miles away. When the smoke was at its worst, we had a hard time seeing the houses at the end of the block. All of this coming upon the heels of protests across the country, and a world in various states of lockdown in order to repress the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. 2020 is certainly an interesting year!

I often turn to music for solace and for renewal, and one of my favorite pieces is the ballet that precedes the “Dance of the Blessed Spirits” in Christoph Willibald Gluck’s opera *Orpheus and Eurydice*. As I played through this piece, looking out the window at the smokey scene, I reflected on the theme of Orpheus walking through the fire and brimstone of Hades to rescue his true love Euridice. This resonated with me and I decided to build a program around a Classical theme developed by the ancient Greeks, about their god of music, Orpheus, and his journey that is not unlike Psalm 23:4— “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”

Milonga del Ángel (1965)

Astor Piazzolla
1921–1992
arranged by Baltizar Benitez

Where would we be without our Guardian Angels? They are commemorated on October 2nd with the Feast of the Holy Guardian Angels. I chose Astor Piazzolla’s *Milonga del Ángel* as the next piece in honor of this day and how we can make it through things we find challenging.

Two Nocturnes (2019)

Quinn Mason
b. 1996

Mark is premiering a work by the young African-American composer Quinn Mason in tonight’s program. In an effort to address equity and diversity in classical music, Mark will be advocating young composers of diverse backgrounds in his forthcoming programs.

I follow with two short nocturnes by the young composer Quinn Mason. The nocturne is a form that was developed by the Irishman John Field in the 19th century, and composers from Chopin to Debussy to Quinn Mason have been attracted to representing in music the magical world found in

the stillness of the night. The first nocturne has a lamenting character and a rhythmic feature that reminds me of a sarabande, with a slight emphasis on the second beat. Sarabandes are in a count of 3 and this nocturne is in a count of 4. The initial statement repeats with a collapsing line of dissonances that then conclude with a rest at the end of the phrase, before starting again. The first nocturne feels like a lament and when I asked the composer about this, he wrote, “I believe this nocturne to convey a feeling of loneliness and emptiness, which can be associated with loss. But it’s not to be seen as grief, but tranquility as though the person grieving is at peace.” To me the second nocturne then explores this feeling of peace and moving forward, while not being unmarked by the previous nocturne’s content.

“Aria Tertia” from *Hexachordum Apollinis* (1699)

Johann Pachelbel

1653–1706

transcribed by Ben Beuming

I return to the Classical theme with *Hexachordum Apollinis* by Johann Pachelbel, the composer of the oft-heard “Pachelbel Canon,” performed at so many weddings and other life-changing ceremonies. The *Hexachordum Apollinis* (“The Six Strings of Apollo”) was originally written for the organ (with a title like that, wouldn’t you think it should be for guitar?), and I am playing a transcription by Ben Beuming. The volume features turns of phrase such as, “whose simple melodies are added variations for the pleasure of Friends of the Muses,” and the preface discusses the Nature of Music, continuing the discussion “that music comes from the ‘Dreymal-Heilig’ sung by angels and from the movement of celestial bodies.” This is the third in a series of six pieces that are constructed in a relatively new medium at the time of the “theme and variations.”

“Abenlied” from *Bardenklänge* (1847)

Johann Kaspar Mertz

1806–1856

I follow this magnificent example of Baroque invention with the “Evening Song,” or “Abenlied” by the Romantic Hungarian composer Johann Kaspar Mertz. There is some speculation that his writing style became more florid, with extensive use of arpeggios (often intricate finger-picking of the chords), as he heard his wife, a concert pianist, practice music by the leading figures of the day: Liszt, Chopin, Schuman, and Schubert. This piece features a lovely alternation between major and minor, to me expressing, joy and melancholy at the understanding that nothing lasts forever, or as Heraclitus wrote around 500 BC “*πάντα ῥεῖ* (panta rhei),” meaning “everything flows/is in a state of flux,” or the common modern interpretation: “the only constant is change.”

“On the Nature of Daylight” from *The Blue Notebooks* (2004)

Max Richter

b. 1966

transcribed by Mark H. Wilson

I conclude with my transcription of Max Richter’s “On the Nature of Daylight.” This is from the second album Richter released on Deutsche Grammophon and has been used extensively in movies, from *Stranger than Fiction* to *Shutter Island* to *Arrival*, and many more. The album was conceived as a meditation on the effects of violence and a protest to war. It features almost glacial change in the beginning, to then find some forward motion midway with an eight-note melody, leading to a conclusion distinguished by flashes of harmonics. The high notes are sustained by violins in the original orchestral version, but with the limitations of the guitar, harmonics were chosen to represent the sustained line. The harmonics feel like shooting stars, brief sonic flashes singing of the “Music of the Spheres,” as Orpheus ascends with Euridice out of the darkness.

MARK HILLIARD WILSON brings joy and technical finesse to the listener while integrating music from diverse backgrounds and different ages with a compelling story and a wry sense of humor. Performing regularly at festivals and concert series, Wilson has distinguished himself as a unique voice with programs that feature his own transcriptions of both the well known and the obscure. Wilson's compositions for the guitar have been appearing on stages throughout the Northwest US and Canada for over 15 years. He works in is the relatively unexplored genre of an ensemble of multiple guitars as the conductor, composer, arranger, and music director to the Guitar Orchestra of Seattle. Wilson has taught at Whatcom Community College and Bellevue College.

Wilson's CD *El Sueno del Camino* is the product of a series of concerts he played along the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. Wilson has been busy promoting his latest CD, a Guitar Orchestra recording that features compositions for 10 guitars, inspired by the pilgrimage to Spain as well as pilgrimages closer to home: Chuckanut Drive and the Edmund Pettis Bridge. Since the start of 2019 he has produced concerts for the Guitar Orchestra of Seattle in fun and unusual venues for the classical guitar, such as the restored bar "The Rendezvous" in The Jewelbox Theater (built in 1932 as a movie theater); the experimental cafe theater Cafe Nordo; and the former Elliot Bay Book Company location in Pioneer Square. Solo engagements have taken him to numerous living rooms and gardens across Seattle through the organization Groupmuse. The summer of 2019, Wilson was engaged in 10 concerts over an 8-week spread, where he played solo concerts, a concerto written for him and the Octava orchestra, and a series of concerts in Portland with the soprano Jessica Israels and baritone Erik Hundtoft. Shortly after this, Wilson was the guest guitarist with the Sun Valley Symphony.

Wilson's work on a CD of Argentinian music featuring solo work and duo work with Stuart Zobel has been affected by the Covid-19 quarantine, and the same can be said of his work to release a CD of Good Friday music written by Nathan Jensen for the Guitar Orchestra of Seattle. The quarantine has not brought any of his work to a stop, but reoriented it: progress is still occurring and new skills are being acquired along the way!