

# ON WONDER

IT'S AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT OF ART AND LIFE.

BY EDDIE SILVA



KRISTINA CHOE JACINTH

Kelley O'Connor sings Juliet in Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, March 11-12.

Last summer I came across an essay by the late poet Mark Strand on the art of Edward Hopper, published posthumously by the *New York Review of Books*. In the essay he considers those paintings by Hopper in which women appear alone in isolated spaces at indistinct moments in time. They are realistically portrayed, but there is a surreal quality to them (Google Hopper's "Morning Sun" for an example). It is hard for our minds to resist asking, or imagining, a before and after to these scenes.

Strand argues that this narrative impulse may diminish the art, or the art experience. He writes: "The tendency to create narrative around works of Hopper only sentimentalizes and trivializes them. The women in Hopper's rooms do not have a future or a past. They have come into existence with the rooms we see them in."

But Strand quickly acknowledges the impulse of narrative, and just as quickly claims it deficient. "And yet," he continues, "on some level, these paintings do invite our narrative participation—as if to show how inadequate it is. No, the paintings are each a self-enclosed universe in which its mysteriousness remains intact, and for many of us this is intolerable. To have no future, no past would mean suspension, not resolution—the unpleasant erasure of narrative, or any formal structure that would help normalize the uncanny as an unexplainable element of our own lives."



KEITH SAUNDERS

David Robertson conducts selections from Sibelius's *The Tempest*, February 19-20.

Reading Strand on Hopper got me to thinking about how a resistance toward narrative may relate to music—which is perhaps not the most appropriate thing to think about in preparation for a season defined by “Music Tells the Story,” I admit. But music is abstract, after all. Igor Stravinsky famously opined that music was “essentially powerless to express anything at all.” Leonard Bernstein instructed the millions watching his Young People’s Concerts on television that “Music is never about anything. Music just is.”

And yet, and yet, and yet, music, as with Edward Hopper paintings, invites meaning, invites interpretation and narrative. Beethoven’s “Eroica” may not be about anything, but it sure sounds like it does. When classical music is explained, in program notes for instance, it is cloaked in composer biographies and cast within its historical moment. In performance, lighting and imagery may be added for effects, as the St. Louis Symphony did brilliantly with Messiaen’s *From the Canyons to the Stars...* in January. Dancers or even a circus may be mixed into the musical experience. Somehow, as do Hopper’s solitary women, the music maintains its integrity. It just is. Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* has remained inviolable, even after it was used to choreograph dinosaur battles in Disney’s *Fantasia*.

To allow the music to just be, to allow it no past or future, “suspension rather than resolution,” as Marks Strand puts it in relation to Hopper’s

paintings, is an unnerving proposition. "...For many of us this is intolerable," Strand writes, "...this unpleasant erasure of narrative."

Yet what we may realize within that unpleasantness is the shattering poignancy of art.

Experiencing the awe and mystery of art often produces a similar physical and psychological reaction in myself—I'm rendered speechless for many minutes. Tears are often involved, but not always. A short list of such moments includes late paintings by Monet in Paris's Musée Marmottan, Philip Glass and Robert Wilson's 1986 production of *Einstein on the Beach* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the St. Louis Repertory Theatre's production of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* in the 1990s, David Robertson and the St. Louis Symphony's performance of Messiaen's *Turangalila-symphonie* at Carnegie Hall, and the first time I saw Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, in the Crystal Theater in Missoula, Montana.

I'm a guy who thinks a lot, probably too much, so for me to be struck dumb by art, with my brain spinning like those circles on the computer that tell you nothing is linking up, is a powerful thing. I think that's what the most profound art experiences do—they render mute, at least for a moment, all the associations you have brought to the art. The colloquial metaphor is apt: you've been blown away.

Of course Stravinsky was mostly being provocative when he dismissed musical expression, and Bernstein gave hundreds of Young People's concerts in which he talked about what the music was about.

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*Of course* the “Eroica” Symphony is flooded with meaning and narrative. But profound artistic experiences do not conclude with “I got it!” as if you’ve figured out a puzzle or quiz.

If we choose not to try to “normalize the uncanny,” I think we may enter into a realm that is slipping from our lives: wonder. It’s a good word to bring up as the St. Louis Symphony begins its Shakespeare Festival this month. The age of Shakespeare was one of wonders. A new world had been discovered, and in the century since Columbus ventured to the shores of the Americas, the Old World’s mind was blown by all the stuff European ships were bringing back. Language itself expanded because there were so many new things to say and to describe and to consider. It’s one reason why Shakespeare remains the champion in the use of English vocabulary.

### WE MAY ENTER INTO A REALM THAT IS SLIPPING FROM OUR LIVES: WONDER.

Wealthy aristocrats began curating their own *Wunderkammern*, or “wonder cabinets,” the precursors to the modern museums, which housed inconceivable finds. *The Tempest* is especially of this time, a story of the New World where magic and monsters reside.

The Enlightenment is often charged as the culprit for the diminishment of wonder in the world with the advent of science and the scientific mind. But this is not wholly accurate, for the Enlightenment coincides with the rise of Romanticism. Wordsworth and Keats, for example, were in thrall of the new visions of the universe that the telescope gave humanity, and gave to their art. Shakespeare too, in his age of wonder, was also living in a time of radical new discoveries, which brought on a transformation of human consciousness.

Throughout the Symphony’s Shakespeare Festival, the Romantic composers are heavily represented: Berlioz, Mendelssohn, and Tchaikovsky. They weren’t entranced by Shakespeare’s plots but by the emotions, the conflicts, the fully presented characters, the buffoonery, the complex thoughts and ideas of his plays. Two young couples enter the woods at night. A girl and boy from rival families fall in love. Whether made of Shakespeare’s words or awesome musical forces, these scenarios are nothing without the wonder—the trembling in our hearts and minds.

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