

Stories that make music

Hans Christian Andersen was fascinated by musicians, and his fairy tales, in turn, have inspired 10 Danish composers to write in his honour

By Jessica Duchon

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The words of *Symphonic Fairytales* are not by a musician, but by one of the 19th century's most extraordinary writers: Hans Christian Andersen. The Danish fairy-tale author's bicentenary falls on 2 April this year and a worldwide project is under way to celebrate him in music. Ten Danish composers have been commissioned to write pieces based on his stories; as part of this, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO), Chorus and Youth Chorus has achieved quite a coup with a new work from Per Norgard, Denmark's musical *éminence grise*, which they will premiere on Andersen's birthday at Symphony Hall.

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Those of us who still associate Andersen with cheesy Disney cartoons, or the crooning Danny Kaye in a massively distorted 1952 biopic, might be surprised that music should play such a large part in his bicentenary. But Andersen spent his life steeped in music. As a youth, he longed to be a singer. He attended concerts and operas constantly, and he was personally acquainted with most of Europe's greatest composers from 1830 until his death in 1875.

His stories provided the inspiration for innumerable musical works in the following decades, including Zemlinsky's tone poem *The Little Mermaid*, Dvorak's opera *Rusalka* (resetting the same story in an enchanted forest), Stravinsky's opera *Le Rossignol*, Korngold's *Märchenbilder* (*Fairy Tales Pictures*) for piano and, of course, the Powell and Pressburger 1948 movie *The Red Shoes*, starring Moira Shearer and featuring a specially composed ballet score by Brian Easedale.

Less well-known still is the fact that music, musicians and music critics helped to inspire some of Andersen's best-loved tales. *The Nightingale* was a direct tribute to the great Swedish soprano Jenny Lind, with whom Andersen was infatuated. And *The Emperor's New Clothes* has always held a special resonance for those close to the musical world's more dubious developments. Music features even more in his novels, all but forgotten today: they include *Lucky Peer*, about a singer-composer who creates a Wagner-like operatic magnum opus - only to drop dead at the height of the applause, hence being "lucky" that he does not live to see his reputation wane. And in the 1850s, long before Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, Andersen drafted a scenario for a "ballet-opera" based on Norse legends, entitled "The Valkyrie".

During his travels, Andersen met Mendelssohn, Grieg and Niels Gade, the Danish composer. He was fascinated by Schumann, who reciprocated his regard, setting three of Andersen's poems to music and describing him as "an exquisite, poetic talent". The complex artistry and virtuosity of Franz Liszt proved equally magnetic at first, though Andersen turned against the composer-pianist's excessive showmanship; and brief acquaintanceships with Wagner and Brahms left the writer deeply influenced by the former's early works - as magical as his own - but regarding Brahms as a dry, tactless German nationalist in the wake of Denmark's war with Germany over Schleswig-Holstein.

Anna Harwell Celenza, associate professor of music at Michigan State University, has just published a book revealing for the first time the depth of Andersen's involvement with music. She is fascinated by him as a litmus test for musical opinion through the mid-19th century. "From 1830 until his death in 1875, he wrote about music, opera and theatre every day in his letters and diaries," she says. "Most interesting is that when his tastes changed, he was willing to admit it. So he gives us an overview of how perceptions could shift at this time, especially in his views of figures like Liszt and Wagner."

Andersen's hankering for music was so passionate that he tried everything he could to become part of it, undaunted by the challenges he faced due to his difficult background. Born in poverty in Odense, then Denmark's second city, Andersen was the son of a shoemaker and a virtually illiterate washerwoman. An instinct for self-betterment, and the networking and self-promotion necessary to achieve it, found him, as a child, knocking on the doors of potential patrons, offering to perform songs and recitations that he had written himself. Aged 14, he travelled to Copenhagen alone to continue his efforts there. But his singing teacher ditched him when his voice broke, and his attempt to become a ballet dancer at the Royal Theatre fared little better, though he did appear in one solitary performance as a troll.

The troll was not an entirely inappropriate roll. Andersen, always hypersensitive and easily distressed by criticism, was furthermore little aided by his appearance. Tall and gangly, confused about his sexual identity (he was probably bisexual) and constantly aware of his disadvantaged past, he seems to have been awkward in every possible way. When he stayed with Charles Dickens in England, the great novelist apparently described him as "a cross between Pecksniff and the ugly duckling". Yet Andersen must have had a certain charm as well, enough to attract invitations from patrons including the

King and Queen of Denmark, and the Grand Duke of Weimar. Lind was fond of him, too, though from a safe distance.

"Like him, Lind was from a lower-class Scandinavian family and, in Copenhagen, Andersen felt that she was not being warmly embraced enough by the public," Celenza recounts. "She was kind to him and saw him as a good person looking out for her best interests. But he was not physically attractive. Maybe that's why he identified with her: people said that she was too plain and homely, not glamorous enough to be a prima donna."

In *The Nightingale*, the emperor's love for the glorious, natural song of a plain, brown-feathered nightingale is challenged by the gift of a mechanical bird made of gold and gems - a clever but heartless device that nevertheless earns approval from the emperor's music master and, hence, the whole court. But in the end, it is only the living bird's song that can save the emperor's life. Andersen's attitude to arbiters of public taste is made evident: "The master of music wrote a book in 25 volumes about the mechanical bird; it was very long and learned, and everyone pretended they had read it and understood it, or else, of course, they would have been thought stupid." The musical automaton represented the Italian prima donnas popular at that time, whose artistry Andersen found artificial and overrated, compared with Lind's (Anderson declared that Lind was the nightingale).

Such truths in Andersen's stories resonate as strongly today as they did 150 years ago. But how can a contemporary composer bring a greater 21st-century flavour to Andersen's creations? This was one challenge facing Norgard, who has based his new work for the CBSO on one of Andersen's last fairy tales, *The Will-o'-the-Wisp is in the Town*. With Suzanne Brogger, the poet, who provided the libretto, Norgard has updated the action to the far less innocent world of the present.

In the story, the narrator - no doubt voicing Andersen's thoughts, and played in Birmingham by Simon Callow - meets a marsh witch, who warns him that the impish sprites known as will-o'-the-wisps are in town, with 365 days to lure 365 people away from goodness and truth. "It's interesting to let these 19th-century creatures pop up in the 21st century and see how the world has changed," says Norgard. Indeed, the world has changed so much that the will-o'-the-wisps find that the town is already too corrupt to notice their endeavours. "At one point, we bring in a rap for the marsh witch, in which she caricatures famous characters from Andersen's fairy tales," he says. "For instance, she says the ugly duckling became so ugly that he ended up like a stuffed duck."

But, ultimately, there is a message of hope: "At the end, two soloists from the choir, reporting what has happened, reflect that the will-o'-the-wisps could not have destroyed the town even if they wished to, because everything towards that has already been done by people. And, therefore, it is up to people - up to us - to lead the world back on to the right track."

Andersen, nearing the end of his writing career, reflects in this story that nobody is interested in fairy tales any more. Does Norgard identify with this? "I sometimes feel that nobody is interested in new classical music any more," he admits. But now maybe Norgard's fresh response to Andersen, with the

combined forces of the CBSO and the young people performing with them, can help to convince everyone that none of this is true. Music and fairy tales speak to our subconscious mind so directly that their power can't be diminished. And, perhaps, in today's cynical, ironic world, we need their magic more than ever.

The City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Chorus and Youth Chorus perform Per Norgard's 'The Will-o'-the-Wisps Go to Town' at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, on 2 April. Anna Harwell Celenza's 'Hans Christian Andersen and Music: The Nightingale Revealed' is published by Ashgate, price £45