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program notes

2020 - 2021 SEASON

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# Bizet, Mahler, & Chausson

April 23 & 24, 2021 at 7:30 PM | Holland Center

Conner Gray Covington, conductor

Karen Slack, soprano | Craig Irvin, baritone

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART  
(1756-1791)

ERNEST CHAUSSON  
(1855-1899)

GUSTAV MAHLER  
(1860-1911)

GEORGES BIZET  
(1838-1875)

*Overture to **Così fan tutte**, K. 588*

*Poème de l'amour et de la mer,  
(Poem of Love and the Sea) Op. 19*

- I. La fleur des eaux
- II. Interlude
- III. La mort de l'amour

Karen Slack, soprano

*Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen (Songs of a Wayfarer)*

- 1. Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht
- 2. Ging heut Morgen über's Feld
- 3. Ich hab' ein glühend Messer
- 4. Die zwei blauen Augen

Craig Irvin, baritone

*Suite No. 1 from **Carmen***

- I. Prélude & Aragonaise
- II. Intermezzo

*Suite No. 2 from **Carmen***

- IV. Chanson de toréador

*Suite No. 1 from **Carmen***

- V. Les Toréadors



## Conner Gray Covington, conductor

Currently in his fourth season as Associate Conductor with the Utah Symphony, Conner Gray Covington also serves as the Principal Conductor of the Deer Valley® Music Festival, the summer home of the Utah Symphony. Last season, Covington conducted two subscription programs with the Utah Symphony and made his subscription debut by stepping in on short notice for a program of Andrew Norman and Gershwin. During his tenure in Utah so far, Covington has already conducted nearly 250 performances of classical, education, film, pops, and family concerts as well as tours throughout the state. Previously, he was a Conducting Fellow at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia where he worked closely with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, with whom he made his Carnegie Hall debut in 2016, and the Curtis Opera Theater while also being mentored by Philadelphia Orchestra Music Director Yannick Nézet-Séguin. He began his career as Assistant Conductor of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and Music Director of the Memphis Youth Symphony Program. A four-time recipient of a Career Assistance Award from the Solti Foundation U.S., Covington was a featured conductor in the 2016 Bruno Walter National Conductor Preview presented by the League of American Orchestras.



## Karen Slack, soprano

Hailed for possessing a voice of extraordinary beauty, a seamless legato and great dramatic depth, American soprano Karen Slack has appeared with the Metropolitan Opera where she made her debut in the title role of Verdi's *Luisa Miller*, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Washington National Opera, and San Francisco Opera. In recent seasons, she has appeared as Alice Ford in *Falstaff*, Leonora in *Il trovatore* and *Tosca* with Arizona Opera, as Aïda at Austin Opera, Emelda Griffith in *Champion* with New Orleans Opera, Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni* with Nashville Opera, Violetta in *La Traviata* with Sacramento Opera and Sister Rose in *Dead Man Walking* with both Minnesota Opera and Vancouver Opera and her Scottish Opera debut as Anna in Puccini's *Le villi*. Additionally, Ms. Slack portrayed a featured role as the Opera Diva in Tyler Perry's movie and soundtrack *For Colored Girls*. Ms. Slack is an Artistic Advisor for Portland Opera, Co-Director for the 2020-21 Opera Program at the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts, and Co-Chair of the Women's Opera Network with Opera America.

Ms. Slack's 2019-2020 season included a return to The Metropolitan Opera as Serena in *Porgy and Bess*, a recital with Opera Philadelphia, guest soloist for Madison Opera's virtual Opera in the Park, and a series of recitals throughout the US including the Vilar Center for the Performing Arts in Vail, Colorado, with pianist Joe Illick. This season sees her in digital performances with Opera Philadelphia, Houston Grand Opera, Madison Opera, and Minnesota Opera. Additionally, she stars in *Driving While Black* with UrbanArias. In response to the rash of cancellations due to COVID-19, Ms. Slack launched a digital talk show, KikiKonversations, which has garnered critical acclaim and a large online following.

A graduate of the Adler Fellowship and Merola Opera Program at the San Francisco Opera, the native Philadelphian is also a graduate of the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music. She is a winner of numerous competitions and awards: most notably the Montserrat Caballe International Competition, Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, George London Foundation Award, Marian Anderson ICON Award, Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation, Rosa Ponselle International Vocal Competition, Portland Opera Lieber Award, Liederkranz Foundation Award and the Jose Iturbi International Competition for Voice.



## Craig Irvin, baritone

Opera News has hailed Craig Irvin's "rich, resonant baritone" while the *Dallas Morning News* has celebrated his "truly commanding baritone." This season includes returns to Minnesota Opera as Orest in *Elektra* and Utah Opera for a reprise of his Lt. Horstmayer in *Silent Night*. Irvin's 2018-2019 season saw the revival of his Dan Packard in *Dinner at Eight* with the Wexford Festival, Lt. Horstmayer in *Silent Night* with Austin Opera, Valentin in *Faust* with Opera Omaha, and Rachmaninoff's *The Bells* with the Portland Symphony. The 2017-2018 season included singing Dominik and covering Mandryka in *Arabella* with Canadian Opera Company, Handel's *Messiah* with the Jacksonville Symphony, Britten's *War Requiem* with Music Worchester, Stubb in *Moby Dick* with Utah Opera, Dandini in *La Cenerentola* with Opera Orlando, and Frank in *Die Fledermaus* with Des Moines Metro Opera.

While in residence with Lyric Opera of Chicago's Ryan Opera Center, Craig was seen as Angelotti in *Tosca*, Zuniga in *Carmen*, Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Sam in *A Masked Ball*, Imperial Commissioner in *Madama Butterfly*, Doctor/ Professor in *Lulu*, and Ashby in *La fanciulla del West*. Other recent engagements include Lieutenant Horstmayer in the world premiere of Kevin Puts' new opera *Silent Night* with Minnesota Opera and subsequent performances with Opera Philadelphia, Fort Worth Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, and Atlanta Opera. Additionally he has sung Count Almaviva in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and Zurga in *Les pêcheurs de perles* with Utah Opera, Dan Packard in *Dinner at Eight*, Mandryka in *Arabella*, and Peter in *Hänsel und Gretel* with Minnesota Opera, made his role debut as *Macbeth* with LoftOpera, sang Escamillo in *Carmen* with Fort Worth Opera, debuted with Sarasota Opera as Marcello in *La bohème* and Anchorage Opera in the title role of *The Mikado*, sang Pirate King in *The Pirates of Penzance* with Nashville Opera and Pensacola Opera, made his role debut as Dandini in Pensacola Opera's *La Cenerentola*, and performed the Villains in *The Tales of Hoffman* and Leporello in *Don Giovanni* with Wolf Trap Opera.

A native of Iowa, Mr. Irvin completed his undergraduate study at the Simpson College in Indianola under the tutelage of Dr. Robert L. Larsen.

## Overture to *Così fan tutte*, K. 588

**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

**Born:** Salzburg, Austria, January 27, 1756

**Died:** Vienna, Austria, December 5, 1791

*Così fan tutte* (1790) was Mozart's third and final opera written to a libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte. Its predecessors, *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Don Giovanni* (1787), have fared better in the opera house. The reason for this difference in destiny lies not in any musical disadvantage—*Così* is brimming with superb music from first note to last—but rather in the generally perceived silliness of the plot. Two pairs of lovers are caught up in a wager between the men and a cynical third party—also a man—over the constancy, or lack thereof, of women. Naturally, the two women catch wind of the ruse to test their fidelity and, with obvious relish, make their lovers' lives suitably miserable. In the end, Beethoven, a lifelong admirer of Mozart, was distinctly uncomfortable with *Così*, believing its story to be downright immoral. (Nothing like an unhappy bachelor to wax self-righteous about other people's relationships, even when fictional!)

Still, the music both demands and rewards familiarity. Within the opera itself, and despite the plot's utter artificiality, one hears music covering a broad range of human emotion. The sparkling overture is content to set the stage for the ensuing farce. It is light in mood, deftly scored, and uses melodic material of utmost simplicity (the simplicity of genius, of course). Like *Don Giovanni* but unlike *Le nozze di Figaro*, the overture introduces music that appears late in the opera, a tune sung by the three men to express their belief that “women are like that” or “they'll do it every time” (imperfect renderings of the opera's translation-defying title).

## *Poème de l'amour et de la mer (Poem of Love and the Sea)*, Op. 19

**Ernest Chausson**

**Born:** Paris, France, January 21, 1855

**Died:** Paris, France, June 10, 1899

As if establishing oneself as a composer weren't challenging enough, the risk of financial failure in such an undertaking helps explain why so many parents of gifted kids push them into presumably more lucrative (and in the past, “respectable”) careers as doctors or lawyers. Case in point: Ernest Chausson, who like Robert Schumann and many more before him did, took up the study of law to please the paterfamilias. Indeed, he dutifully completed legal studies and served as a lawyer for the Court of Appeals in Paris before ditching that profession for music. He enrolled at the Paris Conservatory to study with Jules Massenet but left that institution upon realizing that his musical mindset was too radical for that bastion of artistic conservatism. His early music was beholden to Franck and Wagner, but by the mid-1890s he had found his “voice,” which maintained traces of the aforementioned figures as well as anticipating Impressionistic color courtesy of Fauré and Debussy. By the time of his tragic death from a bicycle mishap, his canon consisted of 39 published works.

In 1882 Chausson began work on a set of orchestral songs, *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, which he completed in 1890, further revising them in 1893. He had been studying with César Franck (often called the French Brahms), but Chausson's score bears prescient kinship with Debussy, especially to *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. In addition to the music, the text to Chausson's cycle came from a collection of poems by Maurice Boucher that anticipates the dream-like ambience of Debussy's *Faun*, which was inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's richly symbolic poem.

The work consists of two vocal sections sandwiching a brief orchestral interlude. The opening movement, “La fleur des eaux” (“The flower of the waters”), announces the fragrant and heady atmosphere of flowers that intoxicate and tease the senses while subtly hinting at eventual decay.

The Interlude is initiated by solos on bassoon and violin that expand thematic material from the opening of the work. Though less openly emotional than the outer movements, the feelings of sadness and resignation belie calm.

The concluding section, “La mort de l'amour” (“The death of love”), seems to begin with fluttering flutes in freshly minted vigor—reflected perhaps by its diatonic harmony—but the mood inevitably darkens. Initially presented by the solo cello it is now partnered by the vocal soloist in a sad, foreshadowing of Chausson's tragic death only a few years after the completion of the work.

## 1. The flower of the waters

The air is full of an exquisite scent of lilacs,  
Which, blooming on the walls from top to bottom,  
Perfume the women's hair.  
The sea goes forth to be all embraced by the sun's great glow,  
And on the fine-grained sand where they kiss  
Stunning billows roll.

O sky that bears your color from her eyes,  
Breeze that goes to sing in the flowering lilacs  
So as to leave them all perfumed,  
Rivulets that dampen her dress, O green pathways,  
You who flinch under her dear, tiny feet,  
Make me see my beloved!

And my heart was exalted by this summer morning,  
Because a beautiful child was on the shore,  
Letting her luminous eyes roam over me,  
And who smiled at me with a tender, savage air.

You who transfigured Youth and Love,  
You appeared to me thus like the soul of things;  
My heart flew towards you, you took it without return,  
And from the half-opened sky roses rained upon us.

What pitiful and wild sound  
Will toll the hour of goodbye!  
The sea rolls on the shore  
Mockingly, and caring little  
That now is the hour of goodbye.

Birds pass by, with open wing,  
On the nearly-joyous abyss;  
In the great sunshine the sea is green,  
And I bleed silently  
Watching the sky sparkle.

I bleed, watching my life  
Distance itself from me upon the waves;  
My very soul is torn away  
And the dark clamoring of the waves  
Covers the noise of my sobs.

Who knows if this cruel sea  
Will lead her toward my heart again?  
My gazes are fixed upon her;  
The sea sings, and the mocking wind  
Scoffs at the anguish of my heart.

## 2. The death of love

Soon the blue and joyful isle  
Will appear to me among the rocks;  
The isle upon the silent water  
Floats like a water lily.

Across the amethyst sea The boat gently glides,  
And I will be joyful and sad  
At how much I remember – Soon!

The wind rustled the dead leaves; my thoughts  
Blew about like dead leaves in the night.  
Never so sweetly did the black sky contain  
The thousand golden roses from which dew once fell!

A frightening dance, and the crumpled leaves,  
Which gave forth a metallic sound, waltzed,  
Seemed to groan under the stars, and spoke  
The inexpressible horror of deceased loves.

The tall silver beeches that the moon kissed  
Were specters: all my blood froze  
Seeing my beloved strangely smile.

Like the brows of the dead, our foreheads paled,  
And, mute, leaning towards her, I could read  
That fatal word inscribed in her wide eyes: oblivion.

The time of lilacs and the time of roses  
Will no longer come again to this spring;  
The time of lilacs and the time of roses  
Has passed, the time of carnations also.

The wind has changed, the skies are morose,  
And we will no longer run to pick  
The lilacs in bloom and the beautiful roses;  
The spring is sad and cannot bloom.

Oh! Joyful and gentle spring of the year,  
That came last year to bathe us in sunlight,  
Our flower of love is so wilted,  
Alas! That your kiss cannot awaken it!

And you, what are you doing? No budding flowers,  
No bright sun at all nor cool shade,  
The time of lilacs and the time of roses,  
Along with our love, is dead forever.

## Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen (Songs of a Wayfarer)

**Gustav Mahler**

**Born:** Kalischt, Bohemia, July 7, 1860

**Died:** Vienna, Austria, May 18, 1911

“Oh, to be young and feel love’s keen sting.” Thus speaks Professor Dumbledore in the film version of *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*. Those words could well have been uttered in reference to Gustav Mahler in the wake of a failed relationship with an actress named Johanna Richter. Wounded and forlorn, the young composer’s thoughts recalled Schubert’s dark and sad *Winterreise* cycle set to words by Wilhelm Müller. In that “winter’s journey” a young journeyman wanders the world barren of hope or warmth. In Mahler’s early song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (*Songs of a Wayfarer*), the journey takes place in spring. Schubert’s cycle ends bleakly with one of the saddest songs ever penned, “Der Leiermann” (“The organ-grinder”); Mahler offers a funeral march—the first of several that would turn up in subsequent works. The words are the composer’s own though influenced by the German folk anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*Youth’s Magic Horn*), Mahler’s frequent and much-used source of texts for song and symphony alike.

Mahler composed the songs for voice and piano between 1883 and 1885, expanding the accompaniment to full orchestra less than a decade later. He also, as is well known, made further use of material from two of the four songs in his Symphony No. 1. Though capable of epic orchestral deployment, in the “Wayfarer Songs” Mahler shows himself to be a conjurer of chamber-like intimacy even when using a full orchestra. Adhering to the folk-inspired texts, the harmonies and general writing are blessedly simple in the very best sense; they enhance rather than encumber the heartfelt feelings and thoughts of the rejected suitor.

A swirling clarinet figure accompanied by harp sets the tone for the first song, “Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht” (“On my love’s wedding day”). The text centers on the wayfarer’s grief over his lost love. Acknowledging the beauty of nature he laments that that very beauty intensifies rather than relieves his unhappiness.

The next song, “Ging heut morgen übers Feld” (“I went this morning over the field”) will be instantly recognized as the primary theme of the opening movement of Mahler’s Symphony No. 1. Here too the young man thinks about nature, initially buoyed and elated by its life-enhancing beauty: “is it not a lovely world” he asks rhetorically. The scoring is delicate, the mood bright and uplifting, albeit temporarily.

The third song, “Ich hab’ ein glühend Messer” (“I have a gleaming knife”) opens with an appropriately stabbing musical gesture filled with great despair. The bereft young man compares his palpable agony to an actual blade piercing his heart.

In the final song, “Die zwei blauen Augen” (“My love’s two blue eyes”) the wanderer attains a state of resolution in music (also used in the first symphony) that is tender and gentle. The text limns an image of the man lying beneath a linden tree. When he awakens he realizes that the beneficent tree has showered him with its white blossoms. Wishing to return to a previous life of calm he asks that the entire affair had never happened.

## 1. When my darling has her wedding-day

When my darling has her wedding-day,  
her joyous wedding-day,  
I will have my day of mourning!  
I will go to my little room,  
my dark little room,  
and weep, weep for my darling,  
for my dear darling!

Blue flower! Do not wither!  
Sweet little bird – you sing on the green heath!  
Alas, how can the world be so far?  
Chirp! Chirp!  
Do not sing; do not bloom!  
Spring is over.  
All singing must now be done.  
At night when I go to sleep,  
I think of my sorrow,  
of my sorrow!

## 2. I walked across the fields this morning

I walked across the fields this morning;  
dew still hung on every blade of grass.  
The merry finch spoke to me:  
“Hey! Isn’t it? Good morning! Isn’t it?  
You! Isn’t it becoming a fine world?  
Chirp! Chirp! Fair and sharp!  
How the world delights me!”

Also, the bluebells in the field  
merrily with good spirits  
tolled out to me with bells (ding, ding)  
their morning greeting:  
“Isn’t it becoming a fine world?  
Ding, ding! Fair thing!  
How the world delights me!”

And then, in the sunshine,  
the world suddenly began to glitter;  
everything gained sound and color  
in the sunshine!  
Flower and bird, great and small!  
“Good day, is it not a fine world?  
Hey, isn’t it? A fair world?”

Now will my happiness also begin?  
No, no – the happiness I mean  
can never bloom!

## 3. I have a red-hot knife

I have a red-hot knife,  
a knife in my breast.  
O woe! It cuts so deeply  
into every joy and delight.  
Alas, what an evil guest it is!  
Never does it rest or relax,  
not by day or by night, when I would sleep.  
O woe!

When I gaze up into the sky  
I see two blue eyes there.  
O woe! When I walk in the yellow field,  
I see from afar her blond hair  
waving in the wind.  
O woe!

When I start from a dream  
and hear the tinkle of her silvery laugh,  
O woe!  
Would that I lay on my black bier -  
Would that I could never again open my eyes!

## 4. The two blue eyes of my darling

The two blue eyes of my darling -  
they have sent me into the wide world.  
I had to take my leave of this well-beloved place!  
O blue eyes, why did you gaze on me?  
Now I will have eternal sorrow and grief.

I went out into the quiet night  
well across the dark heath.  
To me no one bade farewell.  
Farewell! My companions are love and sorrow!

On the road there stands a linden tree,  
and there for the first time I found rest in sleep!  
Under the linden tree  
that snowed its blooms onto me -  
I did not know how life went on,  
and all was well again!  
All! All, love and sorrow  
and world and dream!

## **Carmen Suites Nos. 1 and 2 (excerpts)**

**Georges Bizet**

**Born:** Paris, France, October 25, 1838

**Died:** Bougival, France, June 3, 1875

Georges Bizet's *Carmen* (1872-75) remains among the most popular operas ever written, though it was a failure at its premiere just months before the composer's early death in 1875. One attending critic complained at the premiere that the music lacked any good tunes! Talk about tin ears! Abounding in instantly recognizable and irresistibly hummable tunes, several composers and/or violinists have created new works based on music from *Carmen*, including Pablo Sarasate's affectionate and daredevil *Carmen Fantasy*, an even more showy work with the same title by Franz Waxman, and the *Carmen Ballet* by Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin, scored intriguingly for strings and a cornucopia of percussion instruments.

Drawing from both *Carmen* suites (mostly from No. 1 dating from 1882 and No. 2 from 1887) a short prelude presents the threatening fate motive that occurs frequently throughout the opera, most significantly at the end. The Aragonaise describes the lively street scenes in Seville before the start of the bull fight.

The Intermezzo is the central point of the opera. Coming before the opening to Act 3 it expresses Don Jose's deep love for Carmen in a short moment of calm when their relationship seems secure. It contains one of the most beautiful melodies ever written for the flute.

The swaggering *Chanson du Toréador (The Toreador Song)* is known by its popular name for the aria "Votre toast, je peux vous le rendre" ("Your toast, I can bring it to you"), from Act II. Filled with himself and responding to the vigorous adulation of the aficionados, the bullfighter Escamillo struts while as he enters and boastfully describes various encounters in the arena.

The rousing evocation of the world of bullfighting introduces the character of Escamillo in "Les Toréadors" ("The toreadors"), who comes to Lillas Pastia's tavern in Act II, boasts of his prowess, and fascinates the fickle Carmen, who nonetheless rejects—albeit only for the moment—his advances.

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