

Musical Treasure Chest #24



Cherry Valley Harvest Moon

For those of you who enjoy gazing into the night sky, October 2020 is a very special month with both a full harvest moon (which happened on October 1st) and then on Hallowe'en a second full moon (blue moon). I was out for evening stroll last night after dark, and the moon appeared impressively large and bright, with Mars poised nearby. I know there are all sorts of astrophysical rhythms and reasons why they appeared so, apogee and opposition and the like, but I just enjoyed the metaphysical aspects of it; truly a beautiful celestial picture that fills you with awe. So many composers have been inspired by just such a view, from Holst to Debussy to Tchaikovsky, and use their particular musical idiom to aurally paint the heavens. But there is something uniquely attractive about the moon that touches their creative spirits in a way that produces the most glorious, spell-binding music. For this Musical Treasure Chest I have selected three vocal works I am particularly fond of. I am sure that I could have made a long list of lunar music, but these selections are so delicately beautiful, they hold a special place in my listening library. Since I adore each of them, they are not given in any particular order, and I hope you might listen as you peer into the night sky and feel a bond with them.

Dvorak composed many operas (in fact more operas than symphonies), and they span his entire career, from before the time that he had truly established himself as a composer to his final years. Some of the operas he revisited several times (such as *The King and the Charcoal Burner* and *Dmitrij*); clearly it was a genre which appealed to him. But only one of them has really gained international attention and remained in the operatic canon: **Rusalka**. This work based on Slavic mythology about a water sprite who falls in love with a mortal (but rather a darker fairytale than the one penned by Hans Christian Andersen) sparked Dvorak, who finished the three act work in just six months. The music is rich and evocative, full of melodic invention and cohesion, and dramatically gripping. Dvorak used *leit-motifs* (melodies associated with certain characters and ideas) throughout. The title character's first act aria **Song to the Moon** is a show-stopping moment. Perhaps unfortunately this excerpt from the full opera has reached pops concert status, as it is frequently programmed as a vehicle for guest sopranos on orchestra concerts, but listened to within the context of its original setting provides an entirely different perspective. There are not many options for the full opera on YouTube, but here is one (not my taste in terms of stage direction) with Renee Fleming: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5S4yh7dHMo> Song to the Moon begins around 20:30. And while I don't like the production particularly, her singing is magnificent.

One of the most recognizable musical moon arias is **Bellini's *Casta Diva*** from his opera *Norma*. A completely different dramatic use of the moon than the *Rusalka* aria, Bellini also creates magic with a staggeringly difficult aria for the soprano, in fact the entire opera is one of the most demanding soprano roles in the repertory, calling for not only incredible vocal technique, but great dramatic skills as well. Rosa Ponselle was one of the early 20th century legendary interpreters of the role, but perhaps the soprano most associated with it, even today more than forty years after her passing, is Maria Callas. She sang the role close to 90 times, and made her Covent Hall Royal Opera debut in it in 1952. Here is that performance. While it is not a film, it is a live recording, with a young Joan Sutherland singing the role of Clotilde in this performance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRDPx8VnFtY> You will find *Casta Diva* near the end of Act 1.

And, finally, even though I have mentioned it before, one of my favorite moon inspired pieces is **Robert Schumann**'s luminescent **Mondnacht** from his song cycle *Liederkreis*, op 39. Listen as you read the text below and see if you don't feel that Schumann has completely captured the moonlit fields in his music. I give you the late Jessye Norman in this recording with pianist Irwin Gage. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hY6beh4Zlw>

*It was as though Heaven
Had softly kissed the Earth,
So that she in a gleam of blossom
Had only to dream of him.
The breeze passed through the fields,
The corn swayed gently to and fro,
The forests murmured softly,
The night was so clear with stars.
And my soul spread
Her wings out wide,
Flew across the silent land,
As though flying home.*