Notes on the Program
By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Babylon Suite

Jörg Widmann

It is rare enough to encounter an orchestra with quadruple winds, meaning four players for each section of standard woodwind and brass instruments. But in the case of Babylon Suite most of those musicians also play one or two other instruments — not just usual ones like piccolo, English horn, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, and contrabassoon, but also more rarely glimpsed visitors like alto and bass flutes, heckelphone (a deep-voiced oboe relative), contrabass clarinet, piccolo trumpet, and contrabass trombone, in addition to slide whistles, if you please. And there’s quite an array of percussion instruments, stretching to such exotica as water gong and riq (a kind of tambourine).

These opulent forces represent the instrumental component of Jörg Widmann’s third opera, Babylon, with a libretto by philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. It was commissioned in 2012 by the Bavarian Staatsoper with no strictures attached. The result, wrote Siglind Bruhn, author of a scholarly German tome on the composer, is a work whose personnel from the orchestra pit overflows into the side boxes of the theater, and which — with two choruses, 14 singers distributed into vocal ensembles, 11 vocal soloists (including a boy soprano), and a speaking role — provides lush, extremely colorful sonic experiences.

The opera’s action takes place in ancient Babylon, at the time when the Jews were held captive there. It involves a love affair between a Babylonian woman and a Jewish man; the man is sacrificed to assuage heavenly wrath, the woman descends to the underworld to gain him back (Orpheus-style), and in the end they fly off together in a spaceship.

The work was greeted by a range of critical response, including a good deal of head-scratching, and the composer and librettist reworked it for a 2019 revival in Berlin. In the interstice, Widmann had created his Babylon Suite out of music from the three-hour opera, yielding a half-hour concert work that suggests some of stage work’s riotous variety. The pages of the suite range from ferocious modernism to reactionary waltzes and marches, with salutes along the way to a good many earlier composers, including Stravinsky, Berg, and two Strausses (the unrelated Richard and Johann, II), not to mention the folk song Scarborough Fair.

In Short

Born: June 19, 1973, in Munich, Germany
Resides: in Berlin and Munich
Work composed: 2014, on commission from the Grafenegg Festival, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam, and St. David’s Hall, the National Concert Hall of Wales, constructed from music in Widmann’s 2012 opera Babylon
World premiere: August 21, 2014, at the Wolkenturm in Grafenegg, Austria, by the Tonkünstler-Orchester Niederösterreich, with Kent Nagano, conductor; the opera Babylon was premiered October 27, 2012, at the Bavarian Staatsoper in Munich, Kent Nagano, conductor
New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances, which mark the US Premiere
Estimated duration: ca. 30 minutes
Widmann is intimately acquainted with the world of woodwind color. Among the most acclaimed of today’s German composers, he also excels as a clarinetist; he studied that instrument at Munich’s Hochschule für Musik and The Juilliard School and appears regularly as a soloist with leading orchestras and a starry roster of chamber-music collaborators. He is also active on the podium, serving as principal conductor of the Irish Chamber Orchestra.

During the 1990s he studied composition with such figures as Wolfgang Rihm, Hans Werner Henze, and Heiner Goebbels. From 1997 to 2005 he composed a series of five string quartets that can be programmed as discrete pieces (each focusing on a specific technical or aesthetic idea) or as a large-scale cycle. These works were specifically cited when he was awarded the Elise L. Stoeger Prize in 2009 by The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Widmann has served as composer-in-residence of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Elbphilharmonie (Hamburg), Cleveland Orchestra, and BOZAR (Brussels), among many other organizations. He has been much honored for his work, having received such awards as the Arnold Schoenberg Prize, the Composition Prize of the SWR Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg, and the Claudio Abbado Composition Prize of the Orchestra Academy of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. He is a member of the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, the Free Academy of the Arts in Hamburg, the German Academy of Dramatic Arts, and the Mainz Academy of Sciences and Literature, and is professor of composition at the Barenboim-Said Academy in Berlin.

**Instrumentation:** Four flutes (all doubling piccolo, one also doubling alto flute and another doubling bass flute), four oboes (two

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**Sources and Inspirations**

Jörg Widmann’s publisher provides this comment about his opera *Babylon*:

Instead of dealing with God’s punishment, Widmann and the librettist Peter Sloterdijk put the focus in *Babylon* on the chaos and the suffering in a world that is out of joint and on the realization of cocky people about the need of order in a heterogenic society. The music reflects this social diversity. The Babylonian confusion is for Widmann the basic concept of his composition. An extreme variety of musical contrasts, simultaneity, and layering but also diversity and cross-cuts, give the piece its form.

The composer himself observes:

Today I would say the sound of this city is similar to the sound nowadays: the next-to-one-another and one-above-the-other of many different cultures, peoples, and regions bears a wild and fascinating simultaneity of high and low pathetic and sacred sounds in a trivial sphere. You can hear a linguistic confusion in the music, which could only be heard in Babylon and which can be heard today. I don’t know that Babylon sounded so much different.
doubling slide whistle, one doubling English horn, and another doubling heckelphone), four clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet, two doubling bass clarinet, and one doubling contrabass clarinet), four bassoons (two doubling contrabassoon), four horns, four trumpets (one doubling piccolo trumpet), two trombones, two bass trombones, (doubling contrabass trombones), tuba, timpani, vibraphone, tubular bells, triangle, cymbals (high, medium, low), sizzle cymbal, Chinese cymbal, seven pitched button gongs, tam-tams (high, medium, low), bongo, snare drum, ratchets, bass drum, lion’s roar, metal chimes, marimba, woodblocks, orchestra bells, crotales, xylophone, pair of crash cymbals, water gong, tambourines, claves, whip, flexatone, riq, cup cymbals, tom-toms, bongos, timbales, bass drum with fixed cymbal, vibraslap, rainmaker, bell plates, bronze plates, accordion, two harps, celesta, and strings.

Listen for . . . the Percussion of Babylon

Widmann’s evocation of the ancient city’s cultural clashes and linguistic confusion is carried out in Babylon Suite through an astounding array of instrumentation. The percussion section, in particular, is populated by a number of unusual instruments that hail from different cultures, such as:

Riq — traditionally used throughout the Arabic world, often as accompaniment to singers. It resembles a tambourine, but with a membrane stretched across the top (historically made of goat or fish skin) and jingles inserted into the frame.

Lion’s Roar — a drum with a cord threaded through the membrane of the head. The cord is coated with rosin and when rubbed with a glove or piece of fabric, it creates a familiar roar, or some say moan.

Water gong — a gong that is struck and then immersed into water to create a glissando effect, ascending or descending depending upon the direction.

Button gongs — or nipple gongs, have a raised center, called a boss, that affects the pitch and duration of sound. The gongs, traditionally used in temple ceremonies throughout China and Southeast Asia, are often used in pitched sets.

— The Editors

From top: traditional riq with mother of pearl inlay; lion’s roar; button gongs at a Buddhist temple in Thailand