WILLIAM SCHUMAN (1910-1992)

JUDITH, CHOREOGRAPHIC POEM

NIGHT JOURNEY

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

BOSTON MODERN ORCHESTRA PROJECT
Gil Rose, conductor


THE WITCH OF ENDOR (1965)

[4] Part II 8:09
[5] Part III 8:00
[6] Part IV 8:21
[7] Part V 8:35

TOTAL 81:41
About three years ago I had the privilege of collaborating with Miss Graham on the work known as Night Journey which was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation in the Library of Congress, and was first performed on May 3, 1947 at the Harvard Symposium on Music Criticism. Working with Martha Graham was for me a most rewarding artistic venture and is directly responsible for the current collaboration. When I received a telephone call last spring from Miss Graham informing me that the Louisville Orchestra would commission a composer of her choice for her engagement, I had no intention of adding to my already heavy commitments. However, as the telephone conversation progressed and as the better part of an hour was consumed, my resistance grew weaker and suddenly I found myself discussing the possible form the work could take.

Actually, my reason for wanting to do the work was not only the welcome opportunity of writing another piece for Miss Graham, but also the opportunity of employing the full resources of the modern symphony orchestra for a choreographic composition. Economic necessity customarily obliges the composer to limit the medium of his score to small ensembles, often totally inadequate for the tonal demands of the subject the dance has chosen and the acoustical requirements of the average auditorium.

In the present work it was my hope to write a composition which would afford a satisfying musical experience by itself but which, at the same time, would be suitable for integration with the dance.
Joseph Machlis to Schuman  
November 7, 1965

As I was with Claire Reis and she was eager to get home, I didn’t get backstage to tell you how much I enjoyed your score. I think it is one of your strongest works, full of tension and theater atmosphere, and richly evocative of that nightmare world inhabited by Martha, or the Witch of Endor, or both. Some wonderful sounds came out of the pit, and notably effective was the change of mood when the scenery gracefully descended to disclose the white-robed figure—whether a he or she I never did make out …. Anyway, the music moved most effectively between the dramatic and the lyric, and in the former sphere it had enormous thrust and tension.

So, between your sounds and Martha’s red cloak a good time was had by all, including—I hope—you. And when you and I are her age, I promise you, we shall not be a hundredth as spry!

NOTES

JUDITH, CHOREOGRAPHIC POEM is scored for full orchestra and was premiered by the Louisville Orchestra, Robert Whitney, Music Director, on January 4, 1950, at the Columbia Auditorium in Louisville, KY.

NIGHT JOURNEY, scored for woodwind quintet, piano, and strings, received its premiere as part of the Harvard University Symposium on Music Criticism, conducted by Louis Horst, on May 3, 1947, at Cambridge High and Latin School in Cambridge, MA.

THE WITCH OF ENDOR, scored for chamber orchestra, was premiered by the Martha Graham Dance Company at the 54th Street Theater on November 2, 1965, in New York, NY.

Graham and Schuman, Times Three
by Steve Swayne

“Miss Martha Graham called me this morning from New York and gave me the good news that you would be interested in doing a work for her and our Orchestra in which she would appear as soloist.” So began the May 27, 1949, letter that William Schuman received from John Woolford, manager of the Louisville Orchestra. Woolford went on to discuss the length of the work (“not more than 15 minutes”; compare this performance, which clocks in at just over 21 minutes), orchestration, theme (“no Kentuckianna”), other mechanics, and the commission amount: $500, or over $5,200 in 2018 dollars. Four days later,
Schuman sent his formal acceptance for what would become his third dance score: Judith, Choreographic Poem. [1]

Compared to his contemporaries, Schuman started composing dance scores rather late in the game. In his rear-view mirror were three of Aaron Copland’s most famous scores: Billy the Kid (1938, Eugene Loring), Rodeo (1942, Agnes de Mille), and Appalachian Spring (1944, Graham), all appearing before Schuman’s first dance score: Undertow, written for the ballet (Antony Tudor) rather than modern dance. Before Schuman could have the opportunity of writing for Graham himself, Samuel Barber had scored a success in Medea (May 1946), which was revised and performed nine months later under a new name: The Cave of the Heart.

Though it appears first on this disc, Judith is Schuman’s second collaboration with Graham, and, as in their first collaboration, Night Journey, and his first dance score, Undertow, Judith also revolves around murder. Anamped-up version of the Samson-Delilah story and a cognate to the Yael-Sisera story (both found in the Old Testament Book of Judges), the title character of the deuterocanonical Book of Judith beheads Holofernes, an Assyrian general, who is poised to deflower Judith and destroy her people. Where audiences may have been repulsed by Undertow (Tudor’s snuff ballet featuring a tormented woman-hating homosexual who murders a female prostitute after having sex with her) or weighed down by Night Journey (the story of Oedipus told from Jocasta’s perspective), here was a story where homicide arguably served the goals of justice. This certainly was one novelty surrounding the new work.

Another novelty was found less in Graham’s telling of the story, which had long been a staple in fine art, and more in the nature of her performance: a dance solo. In its premiere, the Samson-Delilah story and a cognate to the Yael-Sisera story (both found in the Old Testament Book of Judges), the title character of the deuterocanonical Book of Judith beheads Holofernes, an Assyrian general, who is poised to deflower Judith and destroy her people. Where audiences may have been repulsed by Undertow (Tudor’s snuff ballet featuring a tormented woman-hating homosexual who murders a female prostitute after having sex with her) or weighed down by Night Journey (the story of Oedipus told from Jocasta’s perspective), here was a story where homicide arguably served the goals of justice. This certainly was one novelty surrounding the new work.

Another novelty was found less in Graham’s telling of the story, which had long been a staple in fine art, and more in the nature of her performance: a dance solo. In its premiere, the Louisville Orchestra performed behind a scrim while Graham danced downstage. The shallowness of the area restricted the range of her movement, but this was likely part of the design, as Graham, in her mid-fifties at the time, may have preferred a smaller canvas upon which to dance. By the time the work made it to New York (Carnegie Hall), Graham had rechoreographed the work, motivated in part by her knee injury earlier in the year.

Graham had suggested to Schuman the structural nature of the score from the start:

Broad introduction into a slow beautiful movement building to a dramatic climax. Repeating the opening motif and developing into an allegro, then into a scherzo. Returning to the opening (Andantino) ending affirmatively. I may have mistaken what you said but as I remember it was something like this. I had thought of the opening ... the summons ... as you related it ... with the petition as the slow movement ... the other dances as fitting into the allegro, that is the dance of gladness, with the temptation as something like the scherzo. The ending sweeping into the dance of sorrow and the final affirmation. [All ellipses are in the original letter.]

In its final incarnation, Judith is a five-part choreographic poem—slow-fast-slow-fast-slow—that traffics in a more tonal universe than the one Night Journey traverses. The work’s triumphal C-major close, reminiscent of the final moments of the Fourth Symphony (1941) and the Symphony for Strings (1943), sets it apart from Night Journey and other large works Schuman composed between 1943 and 1949. To paraphrase my own words from my Schuman biography: “Schuman’s predilection for ending his works in a blaze of major-triad glory will become more pronounced after Judith; rare will be the extended composition after 1949 that does not undergo some kind of cadential absolution for its highly chromatic sins.”

Prior to Judith and their first collaboration, Night Journey, Schuman and Graham had been eyeing and “ear-ing” one another for a few years, and when the moment came, it was memorable on both sides. In a May 1975 interview with John Gruen, a writer and critic on the arts in general and dance in particular, Schuman recounted that moment:
I can tell you when I first met her personally, because it’s something I will never forget. She was brought back to meet me after a performance of one of my symphonies with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky. And Katharine Cornell brought her to me. Katharine Cornell came up to me and introduced herself. She didn’t have to: I recognized her immediately, of course, and she said that Martha Graham wanted to meet with me. And Martha looked into my eyes, and if you’ve ever been looked by Martha’s eyes, you are forever changed. They’re like no other eyes in the world. [Laughter] They change you. She said, ‘Mr. Schuman, your music moves me.’ I wanted to scream, ‘Ma,’ and run. [Laughter] And I knew that whatever that woman ever asked me to do, I would do. I just knew. And I said that it was a great honor to meet her, and of course, it would be my privilege to compose for her.

Given the dates of Koussevitzky performances of Schuman’s symphonies, this encounter would have had to occur before December 1944. So Schuman expressed his willingness to write for Graham. In mid-1946, the opportunity arose, albeit obliquely.

Harold Spivacke, chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, wrote to Schuman in July 1946 “about the commission to write dance music for Martha Graham which we discussed by telephone last month. Did you have an opportunity to discuss this with her? At any rate I am naturally eager to know your decision and will be very grateful if you will write me at your earliest convenience.” The letter overlapped with a second phone exchange between Schuman and Spivacke, in which Schuman acknowledged his eagerness but confided that he had no contact information for Graham. Spivacke hunted down Graham’s phone number, passed it along to Schuman, and Schuman called Graham to find out what she had in mind.

As it happened, she had two scenarios in mind: “One, the ballad one, has been worked out in more detail because I started it first. And also we had spoken about it. The other is essentially a tragedy and has no words. I am sending a rough draft and you judge whether
you would rather do something like that. As you see they both start with a literary allusion. But the work itself need have none of it and probably will not have in the strict sense.” The ballad, *Tam Lin*, filled sixteen pages; the treatment of the tragedy ran across only three, with the heading: “UNTITLED: JOCASTA’S DANCE.” Schuman was drawn to the second idea, as was Graham: this would become *Night Journey*.

“I am glad you did choose the Jocasta’s dance,” Graham wrote to Schuman. “I had started to work on the Tam Lin so that it was much more detailed and I finished it sooner. But the one I would like best to dance is the Jocasta. I think because I can hear your power and rich dark tragic sense musically. Of course it is all in my imagination. But I think I can feel on my skin what you will write.”

In her retelling of the story of Oedipus slaying his father, Laius, and marrying his mother, Jocasta, Graham adopted the version of the Greek tale where Jocasta commits suicide, an act that is both literal and metaphorical. “This is the hidden, secret, often violent action performed by the heart in the instant of stillness following catastrophe. It is the instant when memory implacably reveals incident after incident in sharp and exaggerated detail. It will be specific in a sense but the overall should have the abstracted quality of music rather than the specificity of drama.”

*Night Journey* set Schuman off on a journey of his own, one toward dissonance and unresolved tension. His son, Anthony, was three years old at the time *Night Journey* was being composed, and an early biographer tells us that Tony wanted the music to be scarier than what Tony originally heard. The score is filled with foreboding and angst, given its near-complete obliteration of simple triads; when triads do fleetingly appear, they are minor in mode; and melodic lines skirl through the aural fabric in sinuous and seemingly insidious ways. As I wrote in my biography of Schuman: “Though the title was Graham’s, *Night Journey* aptly embodies the bleak darkness that runs through Schuman’s first collaboration with Graham.”

Late in the 1950s, Schuman secretly undertook a study of Webern’s oeuvre and composed a set of variations on a twelve-tone row that he left unpublished. A creative tension then marked Schuman’s life in the 1960s, as he ping-ponged between works of almost instant accessibility—the arrangement of Ives’s *Variations on “America”* and *The Orchestra Song*, both from 1963—and works of dense chromaticism with hints of serialism—Symphonies nos. 7–9 (1960, 1962, and 1969, respectively).

*The Witch of Endor* sits decisively on the sonically jarring end of this spectrum. And its genesis came about in ways almost as jarring as the work’s opening sonority, with its use of a slap stick (so notated in the manuscript). Schuman was at an event honoring Graham’s seventieth birthday sometime in 1964. “I made a speech about Martha, and I said, ‘Someday I’ll think of a birthday present to give you.’ So she got up before this whole crowd and said, ‘Bill, I want a birthday present, and it’s in the form of a new score. You can’t deny me in front of all these people.’ I said, ‘I wouldn’t deny you publicly or privately.’”

*Endor* was a gift Graham gave to herself, in more ways than one. Her agent wrote to Schuman to consummate the agreement he and Graham had reached by early June 1965. “… you have accepted a commission from Martha Graham to compose an orchestral score for a new dance work at present entitled THE WITCH OF ENDOR, the length of which, from thirty to forty-five minutes, to be agreed on between you. Martha Graham agrees to pay you $5,000 for the work” (nearly $40,000 in 2018 dollars; Graham also footed the bill for score preparation, which was an added 50% above the commission). Schuman agreed to churn out over forty minutes of music—what has ended up being his longest orchestral score timerwise—in just under two months.

Once again, Graham turned to stories of the Jewish people for her scenario. Saul, Israel’s first king, travels in disguise to visit the witch of Endor. Having outlawed seers in the land, Saul nevertheless seeks her out and asks her to conjure Samuel’s spirit for him. She obliges, and Samuel prophesies Saul’s demise. The witch recoils at both the prophecy and
the recognition of Saul, the man who threatened all seers with death. Saul had promised in advance not to punish the witch for her sorcery, and at the end, she comforts him and his men by killing a fattened calf and making for them a feast the day before the men’s massacre and Saul’s suicide.

As one might expect in a dance score, the music has its share of repeats and ostinati, which helps to explain Schuman’s willingness to take the commission with such little time to compose. But the sonic world the music occupies is nothing short of startling—compare the opening of Endor to the opening of the Eighth Symphony (1962) for its sonic precursor—and if there is a simple triad in the piece, I’ve not come across it in my study. Even more remarkable for Schuman, the music for The Witch of Endor is all new music. It does not draw upon earlier scores, neither does Schuman cannibalize Endor for future scores (as he did with the film score The Earth Is Born, parts of which reappear in the Seventh Symphony). Added to the fact that Endor was completed in less than two months, and its near-total originality is all the more astounding.

Privately, Graham had promised Schuman that she would not dance in the work. Privately, Schuman had said to others that Graham was past her prime. But it was her very public gift to herself, and recipients of gifts can do as they please. So it was that Graham elected to portray the witch at the premiere on November 2, 1965. The reviews and later recollections suggest that Graham’s decision was ill-advised.

One outcome of Graham’s commission was a private recording of the score, which she used for rehearsals and which Schuman attempted to release commercially: first alongside the 1961 soundtrack of the film of Night Journey, and then later alongside a recording of Judith. The quality of the recordings of the earlier works and the lack of funds to rerecord all three of them led the plans to release an all-Graham/all-Schuman recording to hit the shoals. As a result, Endor languished in the sonic vaults and the manuscript archives, giving an impression that the work is second-drawer Schuman. It is not, and this recording of Endor represents the first commercial release of some of Schuman’s most dissonant and fantastic music.

In short, this compilation of three scores Schuman prepared for Graham represents a high-water mark in the history of recordings. It is the all—Graham/all—Schuman recording Schuman was hoping for; this time with even more music than Schuman envisioned back when technology limited how much music could appear on a long—playing record. The journey to this recording has taken over seventy years, and neither Graham nor Schuman is alive to celebrate this triumvirate of dance scores. But their heirs—artistic and otherwise—may now revel in the glories of these two creative artists and the fruits of their entwined visions for modern dance in the United States.

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Steve Swayne is the Jacob H. Strauss 1922 Professor of Music at Dartmouth College and author of the biography Orpheus in Manhattan: William Schuman and the Shaping of America’s Musical Life.
William Schuman earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Columbia University Teachers College, and he studied at Juilliard with Roy Harris, who exercised a strong influence on the young composer and brought him to the attention of Serge Koussevitzky, who championed many early works. Schuman wrote a plethora of works in virtually every musical genre, each mirroring his strong personality in their sharply defined sense of structure, line, and dynamism. He incorporated American jazz and folk traditions into works which ranged from a harmonically conservative early style to later excursions into dissonance and polytonality. The secular cantata A Free Song received the first Pulitzer Prize in music in 1943.

Schuman was also a vital force in American musical life as an administrator. By the age of 35, he had been director of publications for G. Schirmer, Inc., and appointed President of the Juilliard School. As Juilliard’s President, Schuman reoriented the entire music education process, and it was under his aegis that the world-renowned Juilliard Quartet was formed. In 1962, he was appointed first president of the newly-founded Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

In the course of his career Schuman was Director of the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, National Educational Television, and the Film Society of Lincoln Center. In addition to his election to both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Royal Academy of Music, Schuman received the National Medal of Arts in 1987 and, in 1989, was honored by the Kennedy Center in Washington.

Gil Rose is a conductor helping to shape the future of classical music. His dynamic performances and many recordings have garnered international critical praise. In 1996, Mr. Rose founded the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP), the foremost professional orchestra dedicated exclusively to performing and recording symphonic music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Under his leadership, BMOP’s unique programming and high performance standards have attracted critical acclaim.

As a guest conductor on both the opera and symphonic platforms, he made his Tanglewood debut in 2002 and in 2003 debuted with the Netherlands Radio Symphony at the Holland Festival. He has led the American Composers Orchestra, Warsaw Philharmonic, National Symphony Orchestra of the Ukraine, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana, and the National Orchestra of Porto and made his Japanese debut in 2015 substituting for Seiji Ozawa at the Matsumoto Festival conducting Berlioz’s Béatrice et Bénédict.

Over the past decade, Mr. Rose has also built a reputation as one of the country’s most inventive and versatile opera conductors. He recently announced the formation of Odyssey Opera, an inventive company dedicated to presenting eclectic operatic repertoire in a variety of formats. The company debuted in September 2013 to critical acclaim with a 6-hour concert production of Wagner’s Rienzi. Subsequent presentations have included concert performances of Korngold’s Die tote Stadt and Massenet’s Le Cid, along with two critically acclaimed Spring Festivals of staged opera. Prior to founding Odyssey Opera, he led Opera Boston as its Music Director starting in 2003, and in 2010 was appointed the company’s first Artistic Director. Mr. Rose led Opera Boston in several American and New England premieres including Shostakovich’s The Nose, Donizetti’s Maria Padilla, Hindemith’s Cardillac, and
The Boston Modern Orchestra Project is the premier orchestra in the United States dedicated exclusively to commissioning, performing, and recording music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A unique institution of crucial artistic importance to today’s musical world, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) exists to disseminate exceptional orchestral music of the present and recent past via performances and recordings of the highest caliber.

Founded by Artistic Director Gil Rose in 1996, BMOP has championed composers whose careers span nine decades. Each season, Rose brings BMOP’s award-winning orchestra, renowned soloists, and influential composers to the stage of New England Conservatory’s historic Jordan Hall in a series that offers the most diverse orchestral programming in the city. The musicians of BMOP are consistently lauded for the energy, imagination, and passion with which they infuse the music of the present era.

BMOP’s distinguished and adventurous track record includes premieres and recordings of monumental and provocative new works such as John Harbison’s Ulysses, Louis Andriessen’s Trilogy of the Last Day, and Tod Machover’s Death and the Powers. A perennial winner of the ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, the orchestra has been featured...
at festivals including Opera Unlimited, the Ditson Festival of Contemporary Music with the ICA/Boston, Tanglewood, the Boston Cyberarts Festival, the Festival of New American Music (Sacramento, CA), Music on the Edge (Pittsburgh, PA), and the MATA Festival in New York. During its 20th anniversary season, BMOP was named Musical America’s 2016 Ensemble of the Year, the first symphony orchestra in the organization’s history to receive this distinction.

BMOP has actively pursued a role in music education through composer residencies, collaborations with colleges, and an ongoing relationship with the New England Conservatory, where it is Affiliate Orchestra for New Music. The musicians of BMOP are equally at home in Symphony Hall, Weil Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, and in Cambridge’s Club Oberon and Boston’s Club Café, where they pursued a popular, composer-led Club Concert series from 2004 to 2012.

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William Schuman
Judith, Choreographic Poem
Night Journey
The Witch of Endor
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