

War of the Worlds

A note from composer, Annie Gosfield

A nine year old girl was playing stickball in the street in Flatbush, Brooklyn, in 1938. Suddenly her father threw open the door on East 2nd St. and yelled “Something’s happening, come inside!” My mother, always the skeptic, came indoors and replied “Aw, nothing’s happening” but she still remembers the jittery buzz caused by the broadcast of “War of the Worlds”.

When I lived in Los Angeles in the 1980’s, I was fascinated by the air raid sirens that stood virtually unnoticed throughout the city. Largely silent, except for the occasional Reagan-era cold war paranoia air raid test, the thrill of hearing their rare howl superseded the nagging anxiety that the alarm might actually signal nuclear war. Naturally I was very excited when the LA Phil contacted me to discuss a mystery project with Yuval Sharon. Little did I know this dream project would be an opera that incorporated air raid sirens, Martians, radio noise, and a road trip to from Gardena to Sun Valley. Multiple trips to L.A. gave me a chance to get to know my partners in crime and work with the performers, collecting Martian percussion sounds, wild organ timbres, and a few bars of Suzanna Guzman singing in the voice of her octagenarian father.

Radio looms large. The 1938 radio broadcast of “War of the Worlds” featured a series of live performances of dance music from hotel ballrooms in New York City. In our opening group of pieces, ostensibly written for the centennial of “The Planets,” I wanted to evoke the crackling ambience of a radio orchestra performing a selection of dance numbers that shift through a cycle of interplanetary moods. Mercury serves as our opening theme, kicking off the show with a fast-paced sample-driven whirl that pays tribute to Sun Ra, King Tubby, and the sci-fi sounds of analog synthesis. Venus employs James Hayden as the modern counterpart to a ballroom crooner, who sings a ballad about Venus, who longed to escape her lonely planetary existence, only to wind up reading “The Hollywood Star” (an astronomically named gossip rag that was published in the basement of the L.A. apartment building where I lived years ago). Earth makes use of Disney Hall’s remarkable organ, focusing on its visceral, psychedelically low terrestrial frequencies, like an earthly ritual gone awry. Imaginary radio music influences rhythm and melody throughout the opera, issuing echoes from the ballroom, the airwaves, and the outer atmosphere.

The vocal pieces are the heart of “War of the Worlds,” written for a cadre of characters who are our eyes and ears outside of the concert hall. The Martian attack is seen from the vantage point of an astrophysicist, a restaurant owner, a meteorologist, an army general, the acting secretary of the interior, and a hippy, in a series of intimate settings, accompanied by one, two, or three musicians. In a fourth virtual site, a trio of unseen airmen sing from an invisible location circling the skies of Los Angeles, reporting their shifting positions and military maneuvers from three out of sight bombers overhead, blending their radio transmissions with the fine musicianship of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. My father was a bombardier in WWII, and whenever I hit a rough patch compositionally, I imagined him as one of those airmen, keeping the skies safe, sending encouragement, and protecting me from writer’s block.

Radio noise factors in too, and is deployed in the “interruptions” that transport us from the concert to the outside world. As the performance is wrested away from Disney Hall and thrown onto the streets of Los Angeles, on-site performers interact with static, radio noise, and 1938 era jammed radio signals, shifting in character and timbre, like a radio drifting between stations, evoking terrestrial broadcasts mixed with faraway Martian atmosphere. Radio noise and World War II era radio jamming has been a longtime fascination of mine and an important element in my work. Some of the source material came out of research that I conducted during a 2012 fellowship at the American Academy in Berlin.

The Martians are represented sonically by La Sirena ensemble, featuring Hila Plittman as the voice of the Martian; Joanne Pearce Martin on theremin, celesta, and sampler; and Matthew Howard on a variety of Martian-tinged percussion instruments. Their performance is beamed directly to retrofitted air raid sirens, which is why we chose the name “La Sirena,” inspired also by the sirens of myth, not only for their siren song, but for their ability to transport themselves instantaneously, bringing the story of the interplanetary invasion to the luminous yellow cylinders in mysterious Martianese.

At times the orchestra in the concert hall is layered with musical reports from the streets, overlaid with Martian transmissions from air raid sirens. We never knew exactly how the different sources might align, so I thought in terms of music that had a forgiving margin for overlap, like an almost instantaneous interplanetary translation. The unknown, flying-by-the-seat-of-our-pants factors made this project an irresistible challenge.

I thank Yuval, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, The Industry, Christopher Rountree, and all of our collaborators and performers. I’ve never had so much fun writing music. I was continually surprised that so much humor and freewheeling collaboration could spring from such a dark subject. Developing a piece based on Fake News became unexpectedly relevant, adding another layer of menace and absurdity to this timely subject.

-- Annie Gosfield, November 2017