A Note from Matthew Aucoin
We composers are often told that new music is scary. And we waste a lot of breath trying to convince people that it’s not scary. Well, this time, I wanted to embrace music’s power to terrify, to repulse, to thrill, to make the hair on your neck stand on end.

F.W. Murnau’s Nosferatu is not just another horror flick. Its fusion of the frightening and the fun and the grotesque has a primal power that reminds me of the best Grimm fairy tales. The film’s visual world has an Expressionistic power that might remind art aficionados of the twisted, crooked beauty of Die Brücke. And opera lovers may feel a sense of déjà vu as they watch this Wagnerian tale of a man-turned-demon who sleeplessly crosses the sea, and of a woman who sacrifices herself for a man who really doesn’t deserve it.

The music of the Second Viennese School—Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Zemlinsky—was written around the same time the film was made, and I find it’s a great aesthetic fit. My score is a collage—a Frankenstein monster, if you will—of orchestral and operatic music both by Second Viennese School composers and by earlier composers in that tradition. The hapless young man who visits Nosferatu’s castle reminds me a bit of Max in Weber’s Der Freischütz, so the Freischütz overture makes a cameo. And of course there’s some Wagner.

In addition, I’ve composed new music of my own and I’ll be improvising certain scenes at the piano. With my improvisations, I’m engaging with a different tradition: in the early days of cinema, pianists often improvised along with silent films, and I look forward to letting my inner jazz pianist loose to provide musical commentary and atmosphere.

1922 film by F.W. Murnau
Original music composed by
Matthew Aucoin
Matthew Aucoin, conductor
Liv Redpath, soprano soloist
Members of the LA Opera Orchestra

with musical excerpts from
Pierrot Lunaire
“Die eiserne Brigade” (The Iron Brigade)
Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night)
Arnold Schoenberg

“Gretchen am Spinnrade” (Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel)
Franz Schubert

Prelude to Act III and Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde
Overture to The Flying Dutchman
Siegfried Idyll
Richard Wagner

Overture to Der Freischütz (The Marksman)
Carl Maria von Weber

“Maiblumen blühten überall” (May flowers blossomed all around)
“Waldegespräch” (Dialogue in the Forest)
Alexander Zemlinsky

LA Opera Off Grand and Matthew Aucoin’s residency made possible by a generous grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Additional support provided by donors to LA Opera’s Contemporary Opera Initiative. Piano graciously provided by Yamaha.
Matthew Aucoin is Artist in Residence at LA Opera. This position, created for him, fuses his work as composer and conductor; each season, he will conduct at LA Opera, beginning with the Los Angeles premiere of Akhnaten by Philip Glass in November. He will conduct two productions, including one of his own operas, next season, and he will conduct the world premiere of a new work by him, commissioned by LA Opera, in the 2019/20 season.

In recent seasons, Mr. Aucoin conducted the premieres of two of his operas: Crossing, at Boston’s American Repertory Theater, directed by Diane Paulus; and Second Nature, a chamber opera for the young, at Lyric Opera of Chicago. Mr. Aucoin wrote the libretti for both works. He is currently at work on a new opera for the Metropolitan Opera / Lincoln Center Theater’s New Works program.

His music has recently been performed by Yo-Yo Ma, members of the Chicago Symphony, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Zurich’s Tonhalle Orchestra, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Alabama Symphony, the American Repertory Theater, Boston’s A Far Cry, countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and tenor Paul Appleby, among others.

Matthew Aucoin has made recent conducting debuts with the Chicago Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Bari’s Teatro Petruzzelli, the Juilliard Opera, the Music Academy of the West, and the Rome Opera Orchestra. This season, he returns to the Chicago Symphony and makes debuts with Leipzig’s Gewandhaus Orchestra and Salzburg’s Mozarteum Orchestra.

Mr. Aucoin is a 2012 summa cum laude graduate of Harvard College and a 2013 recipient of a graduate diploma in composition from The Juilliard School. (MatthewAucoin.com)

Soprano Liv Redpath, a member of LA Opera’s Domingo-Colburn-Stein Young Artist Program, made her company debut earlier this season as the Second Apparition (Bloody Child) in Macbeth. She recently performed Echo in Ariadne auf Naxos with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and Héro in Béatrice et Bénédict with Aspen Opera Center. She earned her master of music at The Juilliard School, where her roles included Thérèse in Les manelles de Tiriésias, the Queen of the Night in The Magic Flute and Diane in Iphigénie en Aulide with MET + Juilliard. (LivRedpath.com)

Film director F.W. Murnau (1888-1931) broke into filmmaking in 1919 and quickly distinguished himself within the German expressionist movement. His 1922 landmark Nosferatu, the first major vampire film ever made, was an unauthorized adaptation of Bram Stoker’s Dracula. The author’s widow sued the production company, which was ordered by the court to destroy the film’s negatives and copies. The company went bankrupt, but since the film had already been released, several copies survived. Only eight of the 17 films he made in Germany survive to this day.

After the international successes of his films The Last Laugh (1924) and Faust (1926), Murnau was courted by the Fox Film Corporation in Hollywood, where he was offered enormous artistic control and financial carte blanche for his next project. The spectacular result, Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans (1927), is considered one of the greatest films of all time. The artistic triumph of Sunrise did not translate into ticket sales, however. The studio exerted more control over his subsequent endeavors there, demanding that he give 4 Devils (1928, presumed lost) a happy ending and turning City Girl (1930) into a partial talkie.

Murnau then left Fox, teaming with filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty to form an independent production company. He made one more film, Tabu: A Story of the South Seas (1931), shot on location in Bora Bora and Tahiti; he was killed in a car crash one week before its premiere.

German actor Max Schreck (1879-1936) was primarily a stage performer, a member of celebrated director Max Reinhardt’s elite theater company in Berlin. Tall and gaunt, he thrived in character roles. He had made only a few films when Reinhardt introduced him to director F.W. Murnau, who promptly cast Schreck in the leading role of Nosferatu. Schreck’s striking performance as Count Orlok may have earned him a place in screen immortality, but it was only a brief foray into the horror genre for him. He appeared in nearly 50 films, using his versatile talents in both comedies and dramas, into the age of sound. He also continued to work on the stage. Schreck made no films outside Germany, and most of them are now lost.

MEMBERS OF THE LA OPERA ORCHESTRA

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Matthew Aucoin’s works are published by Associated Music Publishers, Inc.

LA OPERA OFF GRAND

In 2012, the LA Opera Off Grand initiative was created to help support the company’s mission to embody the diversity, pioneering spirit and artistic sensibility unique to Los Angeles. Complementing the company’s existing mainstage opera and educational programming, LA Opera Off Grand encompasses a wide variety of artistic exploration. Its objectives are to serve a broader geographical area, to increase audience diversity and to expand the range of experiences available to existing audiences. To learn more, visit LAOpera.org/OffGrand.

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