**Petrushka Explained: The Circumstances and Inspiration**

In advance of the Boston Philharmonic Youth Orchestra’s concert of Petrushka in March 2020, Ben Zander enthusiastically requested that every orchestra member ‘write, call, instagram, text and email all your friends about our concert’. Amongst others, this was taken up by one of the violas, who wrote to all of his teachers at his school and asked them to come. When - as a result of COVID-19 - Symphony Hall decided that there could be no audience, he gave his teachers the link to the live stream. His English teacher watched with her enthralled 10-year old daughter.

She wrote:

*My daughter (10) and I just watched the Petrushka piece. It was beyond lovely. Her reactions: "sad, cool, suspenseful;" then, "I felt it - how Petrushka felt;" and finally "really, really good and talented." Throughout the piece she was rooting for Petrushka to win the ballerina. I asked why, and she said she just knows they belong together.*

*I felt much of the same but gave more attention to how the music created all those feelings she identified. I also imagined the hours spent rehearsing and thought about what an amazing experience you have shared with your fellow musicians. I was really touched at the end when the musicians stomped their feet for the effect of what should have been thundering applause from the audience. It was an eerie reminder that you were playing to an absent crowd in such a grand hall. I'm really sorry that your final experience (as a student) was marred by a sign of our uncertain times. (What a story you will have for your children and grandchildren.)*

This teacher later requested to send the concert video out to friends who were home-schooling during the pandemic: ‘There is a great opportunity to use this as a lesson in music, storytelling, vocabulary, culture, etc.’

Ben Zander of course encouraged her to send it out. But he was so inspired by her question about how music creates its emotional reactions - even in a ten-year-old - that he settled down to write a detailed description of the whole ballet. The aim: that the young girl could learn the story in order to more fully appreciate the music.

Ben’s letter to the ten-year old girl, Natalie:

*Dear Natasha,*

*When you open this link you will find an explanation of the musical story of Petrushka.*

*I am grateful to you for having inspired me to rethink this music as if through the eyes and ears of a really smart ten-year-old. I am also grateful to your mother because when you said you were rooting for Petrushka to win the ballerina, she asked the question: “Why did the music make you, and her, feel that way?” I am also grateful that [our young violist] enrolled his school teachers to tune in to the live-stream of our concert in Symphony Hall and to them for having done so. That’s how possibility works!*

*I hope you are not too confused about your name. When I started to write down my thoughts, I had no idea what your name was, so I just put “Linda" as a place holder. Then, I said to myself, she can’t possibly be called Linda, it must be Natasha. Imagine how surprised I was when I heard from your mother that it is Natalie, because that is the American form of the Russian Natalia or Natasha (or the other way around!). So in my mind, for this very Russian project, you have become Natasha!*

*The streaming-video of the concert is the first item, because that is how the whole thing began. I think it is probably necessary to watch that to appreciate my description.*

*Thank you for your inspiration*

*Have Fun*

*Ben Zander*

*P.S. Tell your mom that she is free to send it out to other mom’s and teachers who are homeschooling their kids. I have a fantasy that 10 year-olds (and their parents) will be enjoying Petrushka all around the world!*

*P.P.S. I have included two other performances of Petrushka by my other orchestra, the Boston Philharmonic, in case you would like to listen to another performance. I couldn’t choose which one, so I included both. They are recorded live, almost twenty years apart. I am conducting all three performances and the musicians are playing the same notes, but every performer adds their own character, so it might be interesting for you to hear different performances, after you have gotten to know the piece so well. Also, it might be interesting to hear the differences between a great youth orchestra and a professional orchestra.*

Ben was delighted to receive this letter from Natalie’s mother:

*Dear Ben,*

*I am writing on behalf of Natalie, who thoroughly enjoyed your narrative explanation and the surprise. She prepared a "white sheet" for you which I have attached. She wrote it by herself and means every word of it! This experience has been very meaningful to her and me, and we have enjoyed our time together listening to you and your performers.*

*You seem to be a natural at reaching out to ten-year-olds. She was able to follow along with your explanations and reacted with surprise, wonder, and joy when you become particularly passionate in your descriptions. We plan to share your*

*lessons with some of our friends and other teachers because we expect that they and their children will learn from and enjoy it, too.*

*Dear Mr Zander,*

*Hi, I’ve heard that you have some of your students write "white sheets”. So, I’m going to do a white sheet on Petrushka and how I understand it.*

*I loved that when you explained it, you really felt it as much as I. You made me understand the piece as well as get to know Petrushka, the Moor, and the Ballerina. Although I still don’t know what the Ballerina saw in the Moor. In my head the characters come to life and I see everything.*

*Now if you could guess, what do you think happened to the Moor and the Ballerina?*

*Did they get married? Did the Ballerina marry Petrushka’s ghost?*

*Thank you so, so much for getting in touch with me and my mom. It has really changed my life. I’m sure you've spent a long time doing the recording just for me.*

*Thank you,*

*Natalie*