

# The Little Prince

## Keynotes

Do you remember the outdoor spaces of your childhood? Are there trees rustling in the summer breeze, wildflowers blooming, and run ins with squirrels, chickadees, and robins? Do you remember the wonder, playful imagination, and perceptive curiosity with which you saw the world? Or how big the world felt even when it was centred around just a few green neighbourhood blocks?

The Little Prince invites us to return to the nature-focused realms of childhood and see the world apart from the adult gaze. In the Little Prince's universe, the insurmountable void of space is compacted into birds' migration routes and the care of a single Rose is expanded to an existential priority. Human adults are labelled exceedingly strange (and often objectionable) while a Fox becomes a trusted companion to be carried in one's heart forever. Daily routines consist of raking miniature volcanoes, using their geothermal energy to heat up a cozy beverage, and marveling at sunsets. This realm and its perspectives are whimsical and endearing, but can they offer anything of value in the face of life's rigors and practical demands? Can a nature-centric existence with an unconventional sense of size and scale serve us outside of a storybook world? I would argue that, in fact, this is one of the best ways forward, most especially with the many complexities of modern life. The Little Prince's grassroots way of life is one built on personal values and beliefs gained from connecting with the wisdom of nature. By contrast, the opera introduces us to the characters of the King, Businessman, and Lamplighter, in whom we see some serious, adult priorities: influence, money, and duty. Yet, these "grown up" preoccupations provide little more than fleeting self-satisfaction – their pursuit for their own sake

proves fruitless. In these priorities we can see hints of modern politicking, hustle culture, and dated societal norms, all of which can leave us exhausted and empty. The Little Prince's relationship with nature allows him to succeed where the

grownup characters fail. He has influence through reciprocal care, he is enriched and sustained by his relations in a way money can't buy. He possesses a grounded sense of responsibility rooted in stewarding his beloved non-human relations. The Little Prince's way of life is, in many ways, infinitely richer than those of the King, Businessman, and Lamplighter. In this, we see the significance and purpose to actions inspired from the ground up. The fostering and stewarding of your relationships, human and extra-human, is how we thrive. It's with this perspective that we can understand the importance of caring for a single Rose. Throughout the opera, the character of the Pilot represents

a human with one foot in adulthood and another in childhood – someone not fully lost to the promises and expectations of adulthood, yet forced into it by age. As he journeys with the Little Prince in the Sahara, he is empowered to reopen his gaze to the childhood wisdom and turn away from adult seriousness. Should you be like the Pilot, unconvinced by the adulthood status quo, perhaps a sliver of the Little Prince's worldview can stay with you. Once you are well beyond the doors of the Royal Theatre, you may find yourself seeing the plants of a garden, the local hummingbirds, or the majesty of the Salish Sea in a new way – as charismatic companions central to our gaze. May we lovingly care for them and in doing so be nourished.



Sketch by Judith Bowden, costume designer  
The Little Prince. Featuring Callum Spivak /  
Jake Apricity Hetherington as The Little Prince.

# Rachel Portman - Film Scores and Opera

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British-born and educated composer Rachel Portman (b. 1960) is one of the English-speaking world's most prolific and successful film score composers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. She has composed the music to well over 100 films and has been in demand not only in Britain but in Hollywood for over 30 years. In fact, she made history in 1996 by becoming the first female composer to win the Academy Award for Best Score (the film was *Emma*; there have been two subsequent nominations). [Note to the historically conscientious: this is not the first time Pacific Opera has aligned itself with the Oscars: 2000's *Erewhon* was composed by Oscar nominee Louis Applebaum.] During her illustrious career as a film composer, Ms. Portman has demonstrated breathtaking versatility and has provided scores for such diverse directors as Lasse Hallström, Jonathan Demme, Roman Polanski, Mike Leigh, Robert Redford, Norman Jewison – the list is as long as it is impressive. Personal note: Portman's first professional contract was for the 1982 film *Experience Preferred ... but not Essential*, a movie I saw and loved when it first came out and which I still watch from time to time.

In film scoring, there is one axiom to keep in mind, according to writer Sean McMahon: the dialogue allows us to understand the movie, sound effects allow us to hear the movie, but it's the music that allows us to *feel* the movie. Before a word of dialogue is uttered, the music can convey a time and place; as the words are spoken, the music can reveal inner feelings – as a scene is revealed, the music can suggest hidden atmosphere. Music can intensify an emotional connection (perhaps in love, perhaps at war) between two characters who are not speaking a word. Throughout the film, music can also provide structure, as a melody is heard persistently. We have all experienced many movies during which all these characteristics and techniques have been used to their fullest.

It strikes me as I reflect upon several decades of movie-going that film scores can have a lot in common with opera – notably (to my ears) Wagner and Puccini. A brief fragment of melody – or even a sound effect – played

by an orchestra to underscore a scene can convey to an audience what a character is really *feeling* – rather than what that character may actually be *saying*. This practice not only recalls Wagner's concept of "Inner Drama" but can be traced back to the 17th-century operas of Claudio Monteverdi. The wordless orchestral music, far from being a mere accompaniment to the voice, allows us to "see" a character's inner thoughts – especially if the melodic fragment (we can call it a *Leitmotiv*) is associated with a specific character or object or place. Or time: nothing moves us to tears more quickly than recalling past pleasures during a period of grief – something Puccini demonstrated so poignantly when he brought the melodies of youthful, hopeful love from Act I of *La bohème* into the heroine's death in Act IV.

All of which brings us back to Rachel Portman. During her time at Worcester College, Oxford, Portman studied with composer/pianist Roger Steptoe; it was during this time that she began composing scores for student films and theatre productions, awakening what would become her lifelong passion. Here she describes her process for composing a film score:

/// I STEP IN WHEN ALL OF THE ELEMENTS OF THE FILM ARE CLOSE TO COMPLETION. I START TO EXTRACT FROM THOSE ELEMENTS THE WORLD IN WHICH THE MUSIC SHOULD LIVE. IT'S VERY IMPORTANT FOR ME TO SPEND A LONG TIME JUST SOAKING MYSELF IN THE FILM. BECAUSE THE MUSIC HAS TO FIT THE SCENES, I WATCH EACH SCENE AGAIN AND AGAIN, TO LOOK AT THE PACE OF THE FILM, AND TO SEE HOW LONG EACH SCENE IS. FOR ME, COMPOSING IS COMPLETELY INTUITIVE. THE THING THAT GETS ME GOING IS EMOTION. ///

Portman tends to structure her film scores around one main melody – in fact, finding the exact right melody is of paramount importance to her:

## REVIEWS OF THE LITTLE PRINCE:

“WHenever I’m starting a film, if it’s gonna need a melody, I’ve got to crack that melody. And that becomes the thing on which to hang the whole score, from which you take everything else. All other branches come off it. So that was the first thing I wrote ... to start and end with it, and to touch on it as you go through the film. It’s like the musical voice of the film, the main musical voice.”

Throughout *The Little Prince*, melody predominates. Portman gives each of her characters highly individual vocal lines, custom-making melodies that suit their sometimes eccentric and always absorbing personalities. That she has written extensively for singers (such as opera superstar Joyce di Donato) shows in her masterful English text-setting as well as her sympathetic handling of a wide variety of voice types (note, for example, how beautifully she composes for the children, from the title role to the children’s chorus). This extends to her treatment of orchestral instruments: “Instruments have colour. For instance, I like using the clarinet because it can be happy and sad, although not as sad as an oboe, and not as romantic as a flute.”

It has been said that any children’s story of genuine importance is really a book for adults. Saint-Exupéry’s short novel has been described as an adult morality play couched in a children’s fairytale. Portman was fortunate in her librettist, South African playwright Nicholas Wright: as several critics wrote, the collaborators “found the right balance between sentiment and seriousness.”

ROBERT HOLLISTON



Sketch by Judith Bowden, costume designer *The Little Prince*. Featuring Emma Parkinson as the Fox.

“PORTMAN’S MUSICAL SETTING OF THE STORY ... IS FULL OF WARMTH, WISDOM AND GENEROUS LYRIC BEAUTY.”

BOSTON HERALD

“MS. PORTMAN’S MUSIC IS UNFAILINGLY GRACEFUL AND CIVIL, AND ACUTELY RESPONSIVE TO THE MOOD OF THE STAGE.”

NEW YORK TIMES

“LONG BEFORE THE FINAL CURTAIN ... MOST OF THE JEWEL-BEDECKED, BLACK-TIED OPERA BUFFS IN THE OPENING NIGHT AUDIENCE FOR THE PREMIERE OF RACHEL PORTMAN’S *THE LITTLE PRINCE*, WERE FUMBLING FOR HANKIES AND BRUSHING AWAY TEARS ... JUDGING FROM THE EXTRAORDINARY IMPACT THE PIECE MADE ON OPENING NIGHT, IT SEEMS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT *THE LITTLE PRINCE* WILL ENTER THE INTERNATIONAL REPERTOIRE, PERMANENTLY ... IT IS PORTMAN’S MUSIC THAT GIVES THE WORK ITS HEART-WRENCHING IMPACT ... SHE ORCHESTRATES WONDERFULLY [AND] ALSO SHOWS A MAGNIFICENT COMMAND OF VOCAL WRITING IN HER FIRST FORAY INTO OPERA.”

STAR-TELEGRAM

“IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT NOBODY TOLD OSCAR-WINNING COMPOSER RACHEL PORTMAN THAT MUSIC IN A NEW OPERA SHOULD BE AS DULL AND “SMART-SOUNDING” AS POSSIBLE. INSTEAD OF SHOWING OFF EVERYTHING SHE LEARNED IN COMPOSING SCHOOL, PORTMAN CREATED A HEARTFELT MUSICAL SCORE THAT HEIGHTENS THE ACTION, NICELY DELINEATES THE VARIOUS CHARACTERS, OFFERS SINGERS OPPORTUNITIES TO SHINE AND, SINCE ITS PREMIERE IN HOUSTON IN 2003, HAS BEEN DELIGHTING AUDIENCES.”

BOSTON HERALD

# Upcoming Events

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## EXPLORE & PLAY FAMILY DAY OPEN HOUSE | FEBRUARY 17

**Free | 12:00pm - 3:00pm | The Royal Theatre**

Celebrate Family Day at the Royal Theatre with Pacific Opera Victoria and the Victoria Symphony! From 12–3pm, enjoy backstage tours, hands-on activities, pop-up performances, and interactive exhibits featuring props, costumes, and sets from iconic productions. Fun for all ages! Free to attend; RSVP to secure your spot for this unique experience.



## LAWRENCE BROWNLEE IN RECITAL | MARCH 19

**\$65 (\$50 for Subscribers) | 7:30pm | McPherson Playhouse**

An evening of opera, including selections from Brownlee's GRAMMY-nominated album *Rising*, where leading African-American composers set poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to song. (Best Classical Solo Vocal Album, 2023).



## THE FLAME: RAISING OUR VOICES | MARCH 31

**Pay What You Can | 7:00pm | The Baumann Centre**

The Flame: Raising Our Voices is an evening of stories and songs from local community members, celebrating meaningful work and inspired by the season's theme of highlighting our better selves. Hosted at the Baumann Centre, this 90-minute events aims to strengthen bonds and spark new connections.



## INSIDE OPERA: RIGOLETTO | MARCH 8

**Free | 3:00pm & 5:00pm | The Baumann Centre**

Join us for a free, hour-long in person event series featuring the renowned Robert Holliston, your personal guide to opera masterpieces. Dive into Verdi's *Rigoletto*, a tragic tale of love, betrayal and revenge.

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