



THE MONSTER

Music by DUNCAN NEILSON | Art by LIZ GILL NEILSON | Text from MARY SHELLEY'S 1818 FRANKENSTEIN

THE MONSTER

for orchestra, choir, and projected images, 2011

Music by Duncan Neilson
Animated linocuts by Liz Gill Neilson

- I. The Monster
- II. The Cabin
- III. The Bride
- IV. Retribution

Program Notes:

This piece tells the story of Frankenstein’s Monster, from the perspective of the creature himself, excerpted from Mary Shelley’s original 1818 novel, Frankenstein. When we read Shelley’s novel, we were impressed with the beauty and eloquence of the Monster’s language as he speaks to his maker, Victor Frankenstein, and describes his experience. We were also impressed by the deeply poetic and genuine connection that the Monster feels with the natural world—the changing of the seasons, the birds and beasts in the forest, which do not outright reject him, but do highlight the fact that he is the only one of his kind. This Monster is a very different character than the one portrayed in almost every movie and pop culture reference that we could find, and we wanted to give him a chance to speak through this project. We have not elaborated upon Shelley’s tale, but rather distilled the essence of the Monster’s narrative out of it. The bracketed text below is a synopsis of events portrayed in each movement. The italicized text, sung by the choir in movements one and three, is directly from Mary Shelley’s text.

There is an eerie timeliness to Mary Shelley’s story; in particular the way that human beings have increasingly rearranged the natural world to their own ends, recombining it or polluting in it often with little concern for long-term consequences. A friend of ours connected recent headlines (the oil spills, the super-storms and wildfires due to climate change) with this story and noted about our culture: “We are Frankenstein.”

1. The Monster (Overture)

{Birth of the Monster—Victor Frankenstein, the creator, flees in terror, just as the Monster awakes. The Monster goes to the forest and his senses orient to the world of nature around him. He experiences the beauty of nature, but realizes his loneliness. He seeks out human

companionship, but is reviled wherever he goes. The Monster questions his maker about the reason for his wretched existence...}

Remember, that I am your creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the Fallen Angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed.

Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.

I tried to imitate the pleasant sounds of the birds, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds that broke from me frightened me into silence.

Accursed creator! Why did you make a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God made man beautiful and alluring, but my form is a filthy type of yours. Hateful day that I was born! I am solitary and abhorred.

If any being showed emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them a hundred and a hundred fold. For that one creature’s sake, I would make peace with the whole kind.

I am thy creature.

2. The Cabin

Violin solo; choir tacet

{The Monster finds refuge in a wood shed adjoining a cabin in the forest—the home of a poor family; an elderly blind man, and his two grown children. By secretly watching the family, the Monster learns about the sadness of the human condition, and also love and compassion. He learns about language and the power of music by observing and listening to them. He brings them firewood anonymously which they credit to a good spirit of the forest. Finally, when the son and daughter are away, he introduces himself to the blind man in an attempt to gain the family’s friendship; but the son returns, sees the hideous Monster and attacks him. The Monster could easily overpower him but he does not want to harm the people who he has come to love. Terrified, the family flees their home for good, and the Monster, more alone than ever, burns the cabin to the ground in anger.}

3. The Bride

{The Monster tracks down his creator, and makes a request. Victor Frankenstein reluctantly promises to create a partner for the Monster, and begins work on a female creature. The progress of constructing the Bride is going well, and the Monster dares to hope that he will soon have a mate. But at the last minute, Frankenstein has a crisis of conscience; he tears the nearly completed female creature apart and throws the pieces off a cliff into the sea. The Monster sees this and, enraged, threatens his revenge: “I shall be with you on your wedding night.”}

What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself.

The gratification is small but it shall content me. It’s true, we shall be monsters, cut off from the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and free from the misery I now feel.

Oh! My creator, make me happy. Make me feel gratitude toward you for just one benefit! Make me feel that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!

*Do you dare break your promise?
Do you dare destroy my hopes?
Remember, I shall be with you on your wedding night.*

4. Retribution

{Killings—the shadow of the monster falls across everyone dear to Victor Frankenstein. As the casualties mount, Frankenstein assumes that the Monster intends to murder him on his wedding night. Instead, his bride Elizabeth is murdered by the Monster’s hands. For the first time, Victor Frankenstein feels the loneliness and misery that the Monster has known for his entire existence. Frankenstein confronts the enormity of what he has done. He vows to kill his creation, to put an end to what never should have been allowed to live in the first place. The Monster lures his creator to the far north in order to break him, and then to beg his forgiveness. For as desperate as his actions may be, the creature has an abiding, childlike love of his creator; for better or worse, they now belong to each other alone. But Victor Frankenstein dies before the Monster can receive forgiveness. The Monster floats away on an ice raft to burn himself to death on a funeral pyre, saying:



“Some years ago, when the images which this world affords first opened upon me, when I felt the cheering warmth of summer, and heard the rustling of the leaves and the warbling of the birds, and these were all to me, I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation.”

The question must be asked, who is the true monster in this tale? Victor Frankenstein, the creator, or the un-named, unloved creature?}

We thank Maestro Yaki Bergman and the Walla Walla Symphony, and Miles Canaday and the Whitman College Choir, for their collaboration on this project, which began during a residency at the Caldera Arts Center in Sisters, Oregon in 2010. Caldera’s mission is to be a catalyst for transformation through innovative art and environmental programs. We thank them for selecting The Monster as a project to forward these aims.

—Duncan and Liz Neilson,
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