

An Interview with the Composer

David Dik, Director of Education at The Metropolitan Opera Guild (MOG), interviews the composer of The Travels of Babar: An Adventure in Scales, Raphael Mostel (RM):

MOG: When did you begin composing and what made you want to be a composer?

RM: No one remembers when I started making music. My family just realized one day when I was around 2 years old that I was already composing rather than just banging on the piano. It seems like a natural thing to do. I've never really been able to NOT think about composing. Since no one else in my family was a musician, I have no idea what made me want to be a composer. To me it's like asking why one breathes or talks or dances.



MOG: What attracted you to *The Travels of Babar* and why did you want to write music for it?

RM: Out of the blue, I received a commission from Sebastian Tomoji Semba of Toshiba/EMI in Japan. I had certainly heard of the Babar books, but had not really read them before. When I did, I immediately fell in love with the artwork. The use of primary colors, and just the right amount of detail, no less, was what really inspired this music. There is very good reason why they are so famous and beloved. And as a bonus, the story is filled with wonderfully whimsical complications. So I planned the music also to have many unexpected, colorful twists and turns.

MOG: How would you describe *The Travels of Babar: An Adventure in Scales*? Is it an opera?

RM: I always seem to do work on or outside the boundaries of categories, and this is no exception. In performance, *The Travels of Babar: An Adventure in Scales* turns out to be a one-of-a-kind, complex of tightly interwoven art forms, operating on several levels at the same time, but all forming an integrated, harmonious whole.

Without altering the original de Brunhoff artwork, I have transformed it into an elaborate digital slide show. Onstage with this slideshow are the narrators, recounting the story; a miniature orchestra; and a conductor. I designed the music with a completely independent agenda: the 46 "scenes" more or less cover the gamut of music forms and ideas. The lighting design dramatically balances all of these diverse elements while adding the magic of theatrical color. All these elements can work separately, if isolated, but together, the production is much greater than the sum of its parts.

But is it opera? The New York Times called it "a new kind of digital video opera" so I guess it must be. However, opera is normally something with singers, and there is no singing in this work. But opera also means production values - a theatrical presentation with story, music, scenes and color, all combining in an appeal to the imagination - *The Travels of Babar: An Adventure in Scales* certainly fits this bill. In any case, I dare anyone to listen without at least a smile.

MOG: What in your opinion makes this work special?

RM: Aside from the fun and joy of it, the clarity and the range of the work. I doubt anyone can appreciate the full range of things I've worked into this score the first few times they hear it. This work contains a miniature encyclopedic demonstration of what's possible in music. The music self-explains the whole range of the vocabulary, forms and ideas of music so it becomes more than just a sequence of sounds. When I was a child, everyone learned the rudiments of music just as everyone learned English. Now many people grow up without having learned that music, like any other language, requires knowledge of its vocabulary and grammar. All the building blocks for musical literacy are here. I did my best to create a work people can lose themselves in and grasp intuitively. The more kids - and adults - listen, the more they will be able to understand all other music too.

MOG: What kind of music did you listen to as a child?

RM: Mostly classical. I usually skipped the slow parts though. My whole family loved music, but we all liked different kinds. So we had the largest collection of records in the neighborhood - and virtually every kind of music possible.

MOG: Have you learned how to play many musical instruments?

RM: Piano is my major instrument. But, I've learned how to play many other instruments a little bit, in order to know how to compose for them. I also have become something of an expert on Tibetan singing bowls, which use an entirely different notion of tuning...

MOG: When did you start taking lessons?

RM: As a toddler, I learned a lot from watching my older sister practice piano. She would practice something over and over until she got it right, and then leave the piano. I would then climb up on the piano stool and play the whole thing note-perfect the first time. It was very demoralizing for my sister, to see her baby brother do so easily what she had to practice so much. She didn't understand that I learned by just carefully listening to her practice. It took her many years to forgive me. When I was about 5 or 6 years old, my sister had already stopped playing piano, and my parents arranged lessons for me. I must have been a real brat, because I rejected a number of teachers before finding one that I felt I could learn from. My first music lessons consisted of being taught how to write down what I was already playing.

MOG: What kind of music do you listen to (not as a child, but as an adult)?

RM: I listen all the time, to all kinds of music. Everything is music. I listen to the music made by machines, like refrigerators, garbage trucks, washing machines, and plumbing. I listen to the music made by the wind in the trees, by birds and animals. The music made by people's voices when they speak. Also formal kinds of music like jazz, classical, and traditional music from all around the world.

MOG: Besides "Babar...", what is your favorite composition of your own?

RM: *Music for the October Moon* which I composed for the ensemble I founded (The Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble: New-Music for Old-Instruments). It's about part of the life cycle, as in autumn, when all returns to the earth, the transformation of death. It transfixes audiences whenever we've played it - WNYC's John Schaefer once introduced a broadcast of this work by saying "If you're looking for music to cast a magic spell, this is it." And the Village Voice's music critic Kyle Gann even compared its effect to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* - but, I say with no small pride, even after listening, people are not sure it actually IS music.