

Origins of Plump Jack

The three plays of Henry the Fourth and Fifth add literary invention to famous history. This rooting in fact, as with *Julius Caesar*, seems to give them a head start toward a story line more plausible and vital than what we expect from the time. I found them an easy choice when Sam Wannamaker suggested in 1982 that I should set something by Shakespeare. The opera grew by pieces. A part of what is now the Boar's Head Inn scene was performed by John Del Carlo and Paul Sperry and the San Francisco Symphony in 1985. Within two years I had added *Shallow's Orchard*, *Banishment* and *Off to War*, and all four scenes were performed by the same forces with added singers and chorus. I then filled out the story with spoken scenes, changing Shakespeare as little as possible, and gradually set those spoken scenes to music as I came to realize that I could not control moods and inflections in any other way.

Mood and inflection are everything in *Plump Jack*. The words come first, and I prefer them to keep the contours and cadences of the spoken stage. Shakespeare in any case is mainly prose and iambic pentameter, both of which I tend to hear as recitative. Thus I place most of the musical content in the orchestra, like Wagner in the *Ring*, and fit a recitative-like prosody to this melodic background. Most of the few vocal melodies, such as the choruses in *Jerusalem* and *Off to War*, are set to my own texts or other exogenous ones rather than to Shakespeare's. His drinking songs in *Pistol's News* scan in tetrameter, however, and are composed melodically.

This bias toward recitative, leaving most melody to the accompaniment, makes it easy to write *ossias* to suit voices of different ranges. I need only pick other notes in the harmonies in a sequence that keeps the rough shape of the line. Thus Falstaff may be sung by bass-baritone or high baritone, and Henry IV by bass-baritone or bass. A single bass-baritone might therefore double both roles, following Peter Sellars' fine idea, although singing Falstaff alone is an ample workload.

Taking my cue from the plays, I wanted *Plump Jack* to be bursting at the seams, as vivid and varied and multitudinous as possible. I could not have done that within the musical idioms of Shakespeare's time, even if I wanted to try, and like other composers I am pretty much stuck with my own language anyhow. But I have sought realism by quoting music from the Renaissance wherever I usefully could. Falstaff's reference to the Carman's Whistle in *Shallow's Orchard*, for example, is set to that once-popular tune. Students will also recognize "Tapster, Drinker" in the first bars of *Pistol's News*, and again whenever Davy is about to sing. Other quotations include the Agincourt Song and "L'Homme Armé" (both twice) in *Off to War*, and the Second Agincourt Song ("Enforce we us") in *Banishment*. The longest and most interesting quotations are also in *Banishment*, in the offstage Latin plainsong that begins and ends this scene. These are apparently the actual words and music sung at the coronation of Henry V, beginning with the Proper Mass for that week ("Judica me deus. . .") and ending with the Ordinary Mass ("Agnus dei").

I would have stolen more if I had found more worth stealing. I set "Veni, Sancte Spiritus" in a way to suggest a work of the time because I could not find an authentic setting that I liked.

Authenticity does not imply quality. Likewise the “bagpipe” music from *Off to War* (oboes and strings *non vibrato*), and the woodwind motifs from that scene, suggest the period within my own notions of how such music ought to go. Many touches in *Plump Jack* are meant to give an impression of Ars Nova or earlier schools without fooling any experts. What matters is that the music must be my best.

Although *Plump Jack* has been performed over the years, or as much of it as existed at a given time, all of it is recently revised. Its slow genesis has tracked my slow development as an orchestrator. Composing and orchestration are separate gifts. Composing is melody, rhythm, harmony and counterpoint. Orchestration is choice of instruments to play notes already written. Composing is like writing a play, and orchestration is like casting the play. Although composing always came easily to me, it has taken good teaching and stubborn repetition to pound orchestration into my head. Good orchestration simply means getting the balances and colors you meant. I preferred to make my own mistakes, rather than let specialists do the orchestration, because the specialists might not know what I meant. At long last, somehow, what I hear back is converging to what was in my mind.

I find it much easier to rank my favorite composers, past and present, than to figure out which ones have influenced my music. It takes shape, and I write it down. Of course it is derivative. I did not invent the triad or the diatonic scale. Beyond that, I am something like an unwed mother who cannot name the father. The composers I most revere begin with Bach, Beethoven, Schubert and Wagner. Yet I hear little trace of them in *Plump Jack*. What I hear more of, come to the think of it, is movie music. Falstaff’s monologue in *Gad’s Hill* may derive from what we hear when Sylvester is sneaking up on Tweetie Pie. Likewise the harp/violins *ostinato* in Hal’s *Banishment* aria, as gentle as the ticking of a time bomb, or the celesta theme that introduces and describes the pilgrims in *Gad’s Hill*, might fit the same moments in a film where the lines are spoken rather than sung. Movies, after all, are spoken operas where the score tells us what to expect and how things feel.

Movie music is all-inclusive. We might hear Heavy Metal as the camera tools along the freeway, then neoclassicism for a picnic in the park, then atonalism as the murderer stalks his prey. By the same token, movie music is less proprietary and single-authored than opera. A film score might include nothing original, and no two pieces by the same composer. *Plump Jack* doesn’t fit that model, but shows a similar bent in its eclecticism and love of contrasts. Clearly it derives from Western music as a whole, but perhaps from nothing more specific. The surprise is that I myself do not know, even though it is my job to study such things.

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