

The Open Heart: *A Fantasia for a Masked Surgical Team and a Lone Patient*

BILL DONAHOE //////////////////////////////////////

Stanford University Hospital Cardiovascular Surgical Orchestra

Conductor and Featured Artists

T. Francis Taylor, MD, conductor

Karl Hartmann, MD, soloist (chest saw)

Peter Wu, MD (anesthesia and analgesia)

Approximate Performance Time: 5 hours, 12 minutes

Program Notes:

In a freezing operating room, a forty-four-year-old male patient lies naked on the table as he undergoes aortic valve replacement surgery, all the while listening to an hours-long playlist he has crafted on his iPod. The same music cycles through the earphones of his wife's personal music player in the dimly lit waiting room and in a Lexus SUV transporting his two daughters home from art camp.

“Count Back from 100”—Music for Anesthesia

Andante

Above a spare piano arrangement, with a voice weary but hopeful, John Hiatt sings *just have a little faith in me*.

In the bullpen, the pitchers, Doctors Taylor and Hartmann, are warm-

ing up. With the backs of their gloved hands, they push right elbows to left shoulders. *With a nod from the senior surgeon, the procedure begins.* The nurses and technicians—the groundskeepers—groom the playing surface with Betadine, the amber color of the infield. Dr. Wu, the home-plate ump, is calling the game. His shout, “He’s ready,” rings out as clear as “Play ball!” *A cup is taped over the patient’s nose and mouth, and anesthesia is administered. The patient rapidly loses consciousness.* The hometown fans cheer their favorites as nine men and women run from the dugout to assume their positions in the field. *The patient’s head is tilted back, and a tube is inserted into his trachea. A ventilator gently inflates and deflates his lungs.*

“Spreaders”—Music for Splitting the Sternum

Prestissimo

On the screen, Robbie Robertson, guitar in hand, stands beside a Navajo shaman holding an iridescent black crow. As the mélange of trip-hop rhythm and Native American chanting builds to crescendo, the bird takes flight, arcing in the frame from the faint blue sky to the fiery yellow of the sun. *You don’t stand a chance against my love*, Robertson sings with a rasp.

The baseball players dissolve and are replaced by a roomful of Russian craftsmen. A man’s chest, a matryoshka, an oversized nesting doll, is opened. *Blood discoloring his surgical scrubs, bone fragments bouncing off his protective eyewear, the surgeon runs a saw along the length of the patient’s sternum. The cardiac fellow receives the scalpel between his right thumb and index finger. He slices open the pericardium, exposing a viscous, beating heart.* These artists eschew the traditional paint and lacquer, instead bathing the fist-sized organ with potassium chloride, the stuff of lethal injections. *The heart shudders, its beat quickly frozen.* An older man opens this second nesting doll—the heart—finding within the paired atrium and ventricle. *Gloved hands move back and forth, holding both the scalpel and the cautery. The surgeons cut and burn the stilled heart.* Within the third doll lies the smallest piece, a valve the size of a thimble. After the vibrant, shellacked beauty that came before, this last doll is a disappointment. The thimble is grotesquely

misshapen—a twisted and contorted castoff.

“He’s On the Pump”—Music for the Heart-Lung Machine

Largo

The room quiets as Van Morrison sings *this must be what paradise is like*. The moment of transcendence has arrived.

The heart lies open, split in two. The craftsmen have left their dacha and are now scanning the shelves of the 7-ELEVEN. *Blood drained from a vein in the patient’s chest is sucked into the heart-lung machine, where it is infused with oxygen and returned by a line into the patient’s carotid artery.* Behind the counter, a clerk watches over the Slurpee machine. A frothy mix of blood and oxygen spin together in the cold stainless steel, raspberry foam splashing against the round Plexiglas window. *Working efficiently, stitch upon stitch, the surgeons meticulously sew the Dacron fabric of the prosthesis into the scalloped remains of the patient’s principal artery.*

“Let’s Close”—Music for Recovery

Allegretto

Playing with his words, Paul Simon sings a parent’s anthem. *There could never be a father who loved his daughter more than I love you.*

Shedding their embroidered linen shirts and trousers, the craftsmen now don ill-fitting, blue-gray plumber uniforms. They return to a job site—the kitchen sink of a mid-century California ranch home—for final cleanup. *With the flick of a switch, the heart-lung machine warms the cooled heart. After hesitating, the sutured heart beats anew.* The tall émigré places the badly corroded bicuspid valve in the white cardboard box that held its gleaming replacement—the top-of-the-line stuff favored by contractors doing work on these mid-century fixer-uppers. There are a few more items to cross off the punch list. *The heart-lung machine is turned off; lines are removed from the patient’s neck and chest. The organ is returned to its place in front of the left lung. An incision just left of the center of the patient’s chest is sewn shut.* Using a wet-vac, the plumbers suck up the blood that has spilled in the cabinet under the

sink. The apprentice turns on the faucet, testing the seal of the new valve. It does not leak. *The surgeons force the ribs back together, the jagged edges of the split sternum yielding as the bone is wrapped with titanium wire.* The plumbers leave by the back door, turning off the lights, leaving the key under the mat.

Mineshaft

VICTORIA KORTH //////////////////////////////////////

Air moving under the overgrown hedge,
yellow dots of coreopsis
on green fan fingers
sway like seaweed,
signal in a mineshaft.

It was a week before high school would start,
and you were not yourself,
head drooped on folded arms at the table,
a cough. There was not much suffering,
not like what some children go through,
but we missed a funeral for it,
and you missed two weeks of school,
and we had a reason *why*, even then.

The day you got pneumonia
was the same day your father left
in spirit—yes it was.
You were not close, not as you are now,
and he had budged you one morning
earlier that spring because you would not hurry up
or take your hat off, and the teacher had said
no hats. You went to the nurse that day
but did not speak of him, exactly.