

Symphony no. 4 Hoka-Néni: Program Notes

Prof. Claudio Aprile, National University of Tucumán

The genesis of this orchestral work lays in the idea of incorporating the symphonic language to the artistic discourse initiated by a series of seven paintings. The result is a musical composition structured in seven movements following the dramatic arch of the canvases.

Point of departure

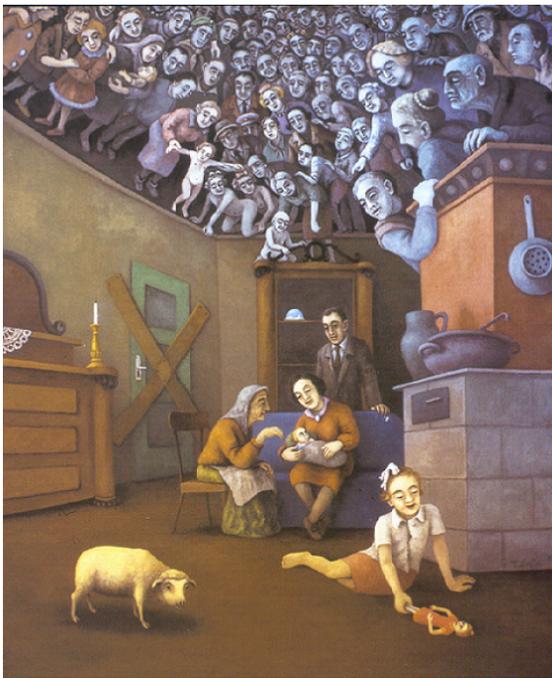
The series of paintings that serves as point of departure for this symphony is entitled Hoka-Néni (Hungarian for "Auntie Hoka") and is the work of Valentin Lustig, a Hungarian-Romanian artist residing in Switzerland. Its subject is the life, temptations and fate of an ordinary housewife from Cluj in Transylvania, who faced persecution in World War II and who was exterminated, together with her four children, in a concentration camp in 1944. To some extent the resulting symphony is an updated reminiscence of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition (1874), written by the composer after visiting an exhibition of paintings by a friend, Victor Hartman, or Gunther Schuller's Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee (1959), based on a range of works by the Swiss painter.

Hoka-Néni is Valentin Lustig's most important work to date. It carries the subtitle Seven Paintings, being the history of the life and deeds of the incomparable Auntie Hoka, truthfully depicted in seven parts by her nephew Valentin Lustig, painter in Zurich. It consists of seven oil paintings created as a continuous narrative and meant to be read as a whole, as a polyptych. It follows the footsteps of a long tradition of early Renaissance artists, bringing the genre to an updated and modern expression. Exhibitions of these paintings have taken place in recent years at the Frick Art Museum in Pittsburgh (2003), the Institut Hongroise de Paris and the Ernst Museum in Budapest (2004), and the Yeshiva University Museum in New York (2006-7).

Valentin Lustig was born in Cluj, Romania in 1955. He immigrated with his parents to Israel, where he finished high school. From 1977 to 1982 he studied painting under Trovarelli at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence. He settled in Zurich, Switzerland in 1983.

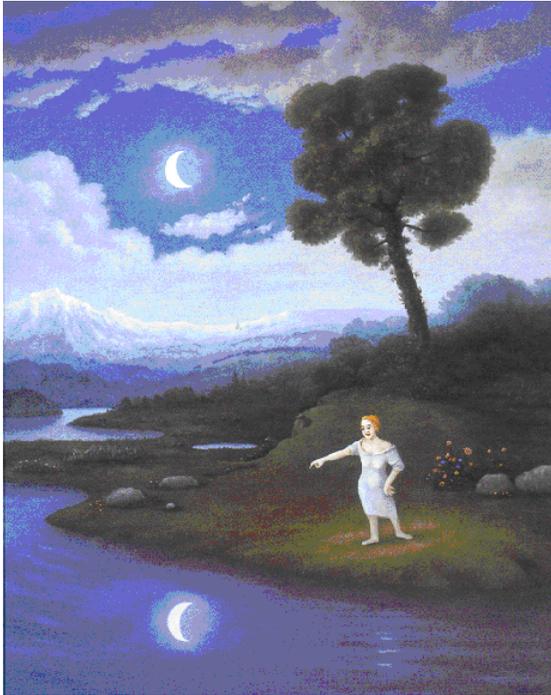
The Symphony

This Fourth Symphony was therefore generated by the visual stimuli from a set of oil paintings. Its structure is particularly interesting: the work contains all of the components of a traditional symphony, including the usual allegro sonata, two scherzi, a minuet, two slow movements and a finale. The order of the movements, however, has been altered in order to better build the dramatic arch described by Lustig's polyptych. As a result, the main movement of the symphony, which is traditionally the allegro sonata and which is usually placed first, is located in the middle of the work, as the keystone of the arch, becoming the fourth movement, entitled *Allegro alla marcia* and subtitled *March of temptations*. In this way, the main movement of the symphony corresponds to the main painting of the series, *The temptation of Hoka-Néni*. Two slow movements replace the traditional adagio and correspond to the first and fifth paintings, both related to children: *Hoka-Néni herself as a newborn* and *Hoka-Néni's own children* respectively. Two scherzi correspond to the second and sixth paintings: a nocturnal scherzo depicts *Hoka-Néni discovers the moon*, while a diurnal scherzo refers to the *Vision of Hoka-Néni's Monument During a Market Day in Helvetia Square in Zurich*, a busy marketplace stained by the ghost of loss and departure. A peculiar moment is introduced by the third movement, entitled *Tempo di menuetto* and subtitled *Antique minuet*, with the composer portraying classical art and classical thought, the proud tradition of Goethe, with a surreal and ironic touch. In seventh place, a *Finale* subtitled *Redeeming chorale and new auguries* brings the cycle to a close, leaving us with a strange sense of nostalgia, redemption, and hope.



First Movement

The title of the first movement of the symphony is *Introduzione* and its subtitle is *Augural Lullaby*. It opens with the statement of the musical motto that portrays Auntie Hoka throughout most of the work. This motif is presented by two clarinets playing in parallel thirds with a subtle accompaniment of harp, timpani and horns. After this rather evocative opening of the symphony, the movement dives into a melancholic berceuse that translates musically the scene depicted in the first painting, *The Newborn Hoka-Néni, Keenly Observed by Her Ancestors*. The music runs serene, although nostalgic and pensive, until the sudden irruption of a funeral march ushers in the depiction of Hoka-Néni's ancestors. As in the upper portion of the painting, they appear in an overwhelming way, as if condemning the young girl just for being alive. The return of the lullaby, with its strange mixture of melancholy and naïveté, brings the movement to its end, fading out under the ominous sounds of the low register of the piano.



Second Movement

Hoka-Néni Discovers the Moon is the name of the second painting. Its resulting musical counterpart is Scherzo I, subtitled Nocturnal scherzo. Eerie harmonies and magical hues in the orchestration accompany an ethereal and magical promenade through the uncertainties of the night, understood as a metaphor of the unknown. The section corresponding to the traditional trio starts with the string section taking over the pattern played by the woodwinds, while the music becomes more ardent and expressive, a reflection of our protagonist's romantic grip of reality. The return of the scherzo with its sections ordered in reverse fashion underscores the idea of reality and its reflection as expressed by Lustig in his surreal representation of the moon and its likeness.



Third Movement

Eighteenth-century classicism, expressed as the pinnacle of German culture, as well as the opposite to its decline, finds its musical equivalent in a very clever way. For the third movement the composer chooses a minuet (Tempo di menuetto is its title; Antique minuet its subtitle). The piece is an ironic rendering of this aristocratic dance so related to musical classicism. The middle section occupied by the Trio brings in another witty device: its melodic motif is based on the four notes that correspond to Johann Sebastian Bach's last name: B flat, A, C, H (for B natural in the German system). This creates an inevitable link to Germany's most revered composer of all times, the Goethe of classical music. This motif takes an ironic turn when a string trio uses it as an ornament in its

brief minuet-like presentation. There is a certain tongue-in-cheek atmosphere until some grey clouds appear in the horizon near the end of the piece. However, a whimsical turn of events brings back the lighthearted atmosphere before closing the piece with a gracious reverence.



Fourth Movement

The fourth painting in the series is *The Temptation of Hoka-Néni* and it is certainly the most important both aesthetically and ideologically. Now we come to the crest of the arch, the focal point of the symphony, the movement that reflects on the most important issue of the pictorial series: the concept of temptation, with its many and diverse consequences, doubt and the

loss of faith being just two of them. It is entitled *Allegro alla marcia*, with the subtitle *March of temptations*. As it was said before, this fourth movement corresponds to the *allegro sonata*, traditionally the main movement of a symphony. Here the piece preserves the tradition by the use of the two-theme exposition. The first theme is a march or a parody of one. With fascist overtones, the music mocks military marches, with false grandeur and sardonic twists. The second theme, by contrast, portrays Hoka-Néni in all her human frailty through a poignant melody in the English horn, reminiscent of a tango-canción (an Argentine tango-song). Interestingly, both the first and second themes are derived from the Hoka-Néni motto presented at the beginning of the symphony, although each one has a completely different musical meaning. The subsequent development section shows a short gallery of monsters followed by a travesty of a fugue, the most serious musical form. For the expected recapitulation section, the composer's device consists of restating the parodied march followed by Hoka-Néni's theme in the string section, only this time superimposed to the march in the brass. Simultaneously the woodwinds play a rhythmically diminished version of the second theme, in a rather hysterical mood. The movement comes to its end with a boisterous final statement of the initial martial tune.



Fifth Movement

Lustig recurs to an episode from Roman history for the fifth picture, Hoka-Néni Shows Her Collection of Apples. When Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, was demanded to show her jewels she presented her sons instead announcing "These are my jewels". In a parallel fashion, Hoka-Neni modestly displays a collection of rotten apples as "her jewels", a moving rendering of her dead children (they died in Auschwitz). Its musical reflection is a stirring slow movement entitled Larghetto and subtitled Simple Song. It is an emotional but simple melody that rises from the depths of the low register of the string section up to a solo violin playing in the high register near the end. The result is a gentle, tender and at times passionate expression of maternal love and pride.



Sixth Movement

As explained earlier, two scherzi are placed symmetrically in the symphony as second and sixth movements. The one preceding the Finale is called Scherzo II, with its subtitle Diurnal scherzo, a counterpart to the nocturnal scherzo featured before. It corresponds to the sixth painting of the series, Vision of Hoka-Néni's Monument during a Market Day in Helvetia Square in Zurich. The scherzo starts by staging the musical equivalent of a busy marketplace with harmonic twists and a hectic pulse appropriate for such active endeavors. However, this commotion is interrupted at times by a waltz-like tune that slowly takes over the center stage, erasing all traces of normal commercial activity. It is the ominous presence of the Hoka-Néni monument in the back of the

picture, an emblem and a testimonial to all deportees in human history. The waltz gains in strength and poignancy until it fades away as Hoka-Néni departs and disappears from normal life.



Seventh Movement

The last movement is the Finale, subtitled Redeeming chorale and new auguries. It corresponds to the last painting, Hoka-Néni's Unexpected Comeback. It starts with the statement of Hoka-Néni's motto fully orchestrated and in a chorale-like fashion. Immediately it gives place to a processional gathering of forces that grows in strength over a walking bass, portraying our protagonist's metaphoric resurrection. With her doubts and sufferings behind her, she comes to face a new era. Hope is in air, especially in the hands of the younger generations. So the music follows this path: as the procession reaches its climax, it is unexpectedly replaced by a very plain tune - evocative of youth and simplicity - that disappears into silence. But right before the

end, a French horn solo evokes one of Hoka-Néni's motifs for the last time. Although now it has a new turn: the nostalgic minor second interval becomes a major second right before the end, as a subtle and extremely simple indication that hopefulness is still possible.

Prof. Claudio Aprile
Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, Argentina