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MUSIC

MUSIC; Making Bowls Sing And Elephants Talk

By KYLE GANN

THE music of Raphael Mostel has always evoked the subtle and continuous sounds of nature: nocturnal insects, the wind, the distant howling of wolves, the music of the spheres. Now Mr. Mostel has graduated to elephants. Specifically, the resourceful King Babar from the series of "Babar" children's books initiated in 1930 by Jean de Brunhoff. Mr. Mostel, it happens, is the composer and director of a new kind of digital video opera, "The Travels of Babar: An Adventure in Scales," which will receive its first New York performances beginning on Wednesday at Florence Gould Hall on the East Side of Manhattan.

For Mr. Mostel, who is 51, no musical transformation could seem more extreme. Over the last decade and a half, he has been known in New York as the leader and composer of the Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble, a group that draws streams of overtones from the rubbed edges of Tibetan metal bowls. His music has always been attractive and accessible; he has consistently been voted a favorite by listeners of the radio station WNYC in New York. But it is still austere, meditative, texturally strange stuff, a kind of lunar music worlds away from any popular, classical or even Asian tradition.

Now, in what he proposes as the 21st century's answer to Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf," Mr. Mostel is awash in major scales, arpeggios, canons and fugues. "The Travels of Babar" is based on the second and most popular of the "Babar" books, published in 1932. In Mr. Mostel's setting, eight instrumentalists, spotlighted as their solos arise, accompany digitized video images taken from the book and projected on a screen. The actors Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach will narrate.

Mr. Mostel's involvement with Babar began with a telephone call in 1991 from the Toshiba/EMI recording company in Japan, asking whether he would provide background music on an emergency basis for a recording of the book. (The company was attracted by his arrangement of five Beatles tunes, "Beatles Sweet," recorded in the pianist Aki Takahashi's Beatles Project.) Despite the urgency, the recording appeared only in 1994, and by then, Mr. Mostel had been bitten by the Babar bug. Although the original commission made no allowance for live-performance rights, he began the long task of turning "Babar" into a kind of digitized opera.

Meanwhile, Laurent de Brunhoff entered the picture. The son of the original author, he took over writing the "Babar" books after Jean de Brunhoff died of tuberculosis in 1937. There are now more than 30 "Babar" books in print, with yet another to appear this fall. With the help of Mr. de Brunhoff, now 74, Mr. Mostel performed versions of his work with the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra in California and at Tilles Center in Brookville, N.Y. But the production this week is the first to have all the elements in place as the composer intended.

For many composers, writing an opera on a popular children's book might represent a financial ploy or an attempt to climb out of the new-music ghetto and reach a mass audience, at the price of lowering one's musical standards. Mr. Mostel doesn't see it that way. "Babar," he says, offers an opportunity to do what he has always done with the Tibetan Singing Bowl Ensemble, but on a more basic level.

"I've always been concerned with how people listen," he said recently in his downtown Manhattan apartment. "My first encounter with Tibetan singing bowls, in 1983, made me realize that I had unconsciously screened out a whole area of sounds and that I needed to reverse that process. That's what led me to form the Singing Bowl Ensemble."

What he learned to listen to were the really distant overtones. "Most of the time we're focused on the midrange part of the sound spectrum," he said. "And we also focus on the regular sense of tuning, disregarding the irrational overtones that are really there."

Yet what he found, performing with the Ensemble, was that as much as he was trying to sensitize listeners, the job was getting harder over the years. "I realized that the ensemble's music was opening up people's ears but that the level of education and experience of music that people were bringing to the concert hall was becoming less and less fine. And so I jumped on this opportunity when it presented itself, realizing that 'Babar' would be a wonderful way to explore the basic vocabulary of concert music."

Thus the subtitle, "An Adventure in Scales." Scales run through many of the work's 46 episodes because, Mr. Mostel says, he was illustrating a story done in primary colors and needed to go back to the rudiments of music to express it.

"There's so much music you can do with just simple material," he said. "Beethoven did an incredible set of variations on that dumb Diabelli waltz. It makes the connection with the audience very direct that you can understand what the musical materials are. And because you understand the materials, you can follow how they're being transformed. The materials I'm using are basic, but the musical effects are quite complex."

For all the weirdness of his usual aesthetic, Mr. Mostel is a highly cultured musician, capable of sitting down and playing a passage from almost any Beethoven sonata to illustrate a point. And listeners will hear more of his conventional musicality in "Babar" than in his Tibetan bowl music: fugues, marches, quotations from Bach and Chopin, heavenly textures of arpeggios.

The story dictated many musical effects: trombone glissandos when Babar's army charges the rhinoceros invaders, and the obligatory celesta playing when Babar's wife, Celeste, speaks. Beyond that, the episodes go through a miniaturized history of classical music, from Baroque fugues to Minimalism and strange instrumental effects.

As Babar and Celeste rise into the air in their honeymoon balloon, for example, C major scales float upward at different tempos. Several themes are based on the harmonic circle of fifths: C-G-D-A-E and so on, which the final victory sequence follows through all 12 keys. A mad scene for the cello uses extended techniques, and a 12-tone fugue accompanies an attack of cannibals. (Viennese cannibals, apparently.) But most of the music is charmingly melodic.

All this makes "The Travels of Babar" a wonderful educational program, but Mr. Mostel shies away from

the word. "When people hear the word 'educational' they run for the hills," he said. Still, since composing it he has dealt with a lot of music-education people and come to recognize two different theories of music education.

"There's the deductive, where rote repetition is required to have learning, which almost all programs emulate," he said. "And my viewpoint, the opposite, is that first you have to have the intuitive experience in which understanding happens instantly, the live experience and joy of the moment of the music. If you have that, then you can go the deductive route, but it's very difficult to go the other way. I created 'Babar' so that everyone could have that instant joy."

The presence of the longtime Broadway and film veterans Mr. Wallach and Ms. Jackson as narrators, besides adding to the theatrical appeal of "Babar," also lends an interesting historical twist. Both performed in the famous 1961 production of Eugene Ionesco's play "Rhinoceros" along with Mr. Mostel's uncle Zero Mostel, who for his efforts won a Tony Award and landed on the covers of Newsweek and Time. Mr. Wallach played the only character in Ionesco's play who didn't turn into a rhinoceros, so Mr. Mostel told him that in doing "Babar," he would finally get to play a rhinoceros.

The last performance, on June 19, will be in the original French and narrated by Laurent de Brunhoff. Joseph Kubera, on piano and celesta, anchors a small group of instrumentalists in all the performances.

Mr. Mostel clearly feels that with "Babar" he has succeeded in aims that he has cherished for his avant-garde music all along. "I'd be very happy for people to compare this to what Disney does with 'Fantasia,'" he said. "It's a sacred mission for the composer to help people understand why people listen to music."

Photos: The actors Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach will narrate "The Travels of Babar." (Carl J. Thome)(pg. 28); An illustration by Jean de Brunhoff for his book "The Travels of Babar" of 1932, which Raphael Mostel has set to music in a new kind of digital video opera. (Laurent de Brunhoff); (Jeff Young)(pg. 27)