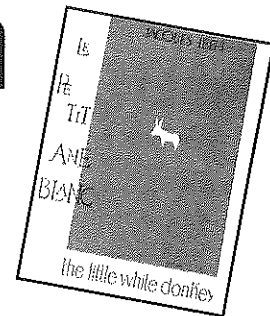


A White Donkey on the Black Keys

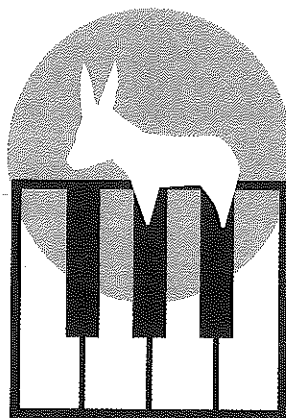
BY JOSEPH SMITH



I am grateful to Amy Chua for writing *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. But not because I liked it. This controversial book is divided against itself. While it professes to be a self-deprecating account of the humbling experience of rearing a rebellious daughter, Chua in fact continually congratulates herself on her highly controlling style of parenting. One may also question her assumptions about the study of music. Chua seems convinced that more practicing is always beneficial. Of course, no one can dispute the value of dedicated practicing. But in fact, too much practicing can engender joyless, detached playing, and cause physical injury and mental burnout. When Chua describes a specific piece of music, it is clear that its presumed difficulty interests her more than its aesthetic values. She seems to regard music as a means of achieving instrumental mastery, rather than viewing instrumental mastery as a means of conveying musical meaning. The reason I am grateful to her, though, is that her reference to Jacques Ibert's "Little White Donkey" (p.42) recalled to me the pleasure this piece brought me in my youth. And this started me thinking about the long, distinguished presence of the donkey in concert music.

Before we review the donkey musical literature, let's consider the creature itself. The word "asinine" *should* be used as a compliment. The donkey is intelligent and friendly. The donkey's famed stubbornness does not result from perversity: he refuses to go where he perceives danger. (Strange how we humans rate an animal's "intelligence" by its readiness to do what *we* want it to!) The donkey is remarkably fuel efficient—he can do a tremendous amount of work on little food. (There is a popular myth that "more people are killed yearly by donkeys than in airplane crashes." According to the American Donkey and Mule Society, this is a misrepresentation: the actual fact is that in Mexico and the Middle East, more people die by accidentally crashing their cars into loose donkeys than die in plane crashes.) Why is the donkey so little respected? I suppose it is the bray—it just doesn't suggest gravitas.

It is not surprising that many music lovers are unaware of the presence of a donkey bray in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, since it appears in an aria that is generally cut. In the fourth act, the scheming Don Basilio tells how a donkey hide protected him from a storm, and then saved him from a wild beast: the stink of the wet hide made the beast lose its appetite. To Basilio, the moral is clear: having a donkey hide—a thick skin—will protect a man from shame and danger. The aria climaxes in a series of loud, ungraceful descending-octave brays. In 1900, Mahler composed *Youth's*



Magic Horn, his collection of songs set to folk poetry. Among these is a song entitled "In Praise of Acute Discernment." The premise is a singing contest between a cuckoo and a nightingale. The cuckoo suggests that a donkey, by virtue of his long ears, should be judge. The donkey, evidently of conservative taste, awards the prize to the cuckoo for singing "good chorales." Mozart's donkey brayed down a mere octave, Mahler's, two octaves and a half-step! To me, Saint Saëns's *Carnival of the*

Animals far surpasses his more conventionally serious works in originality and ingenuity. Thus, I have always found it to be a delightful irony that he suppressed this "Great Zoological Fantasy," fearing that its facetiousness would tarnish his reputation. While he did allow it to be performed at private musicales, it was only published posthumously in 1922. With its bizarrely heterogeneous instrumentation and impudently parodistic elements, it does in fact seem twentieth century in sensibility. (Please note that Saint Saëns never sanctioned the practice of doubling strings—this is not an orchestral piece, but a chamber work for eleven players.) In the eighth movement, "Personages with Long Ears," two violins challenge one another to ever more extravagant two-note descents. In the cancan-like finale, it is the donkeys that deliver the last kick.

With his 1932 *Grand Canyon Suite*, Ferde Grofé enjoyed a huge success, due in part to Toscanini, in part to donkeys. Toscanini's musical taste was highly conservative, but he did feel the responsibility of occasionally programming works by contemporary Americans. His espousal of the suite helped establish it as a classic. But perhaps the donkey was a more important factor in its popularity. We have considered works that evoke the donkey's bray: "On the Trail," the suite's third movement, depicts a donkey's gait as well. Coconut shells mark hoofbeats in 4/4 time, against an oboe melody in 6/8. The slight rhythmic disparity between melody and accompaniment produces a piquant loping effect. The other movements are effective impressionistic music, but it is unquestionably the delightful rhythm of "On the Trail" that we wait for. Now for our piano donkey. "The Little White Donkey" comes from Jacques Ibert's colorful, light 1922 collection of *Histoires*, and is reproduced in this issue on page 42. Since the donkey in question is small, all the characteristic donkey gestures—trotting, kicking, and braying—are miniaturized. The donkey is heard from afar, trots into sight, and trots off again in the distance. The final bars are a series of subdued, delicate brays. This is a donkey one is happy to invite into the music room!