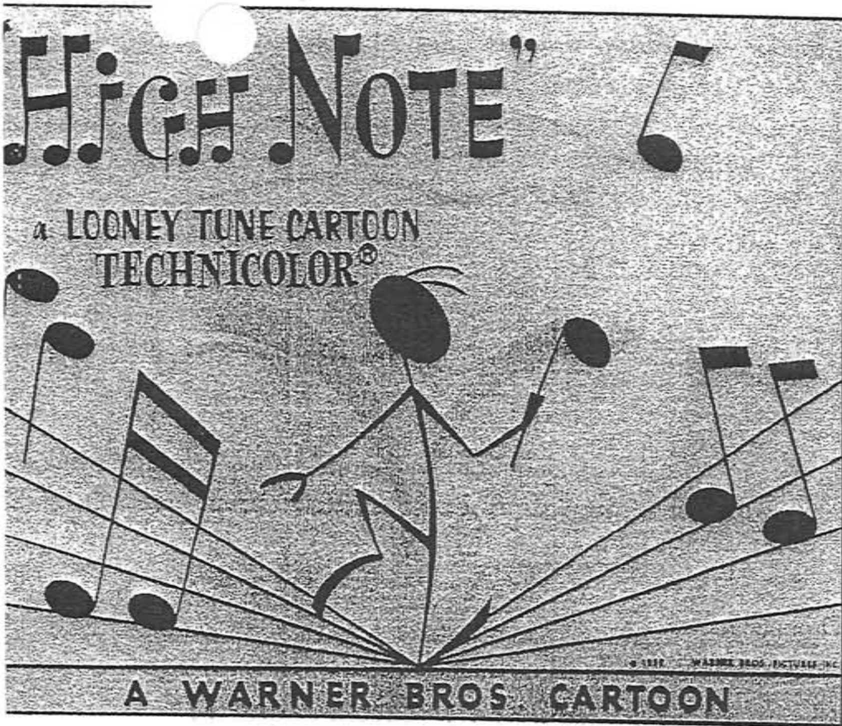

obby card from one of Chuck Jones' later musical (ad)ventures, *High Note*.
/arner Bros., Inc.

:h people in the motion picture industry will see fit to do so. Only one seri-
; danger confronts the animator: an underevaluation of his medium. If the
ıtion picture producer, writer, or musician believes the end purpose of the
mated cartoon to be the cartoon short of today, then it must follow that the
l purpose of easel painting is the comic strip. The animated cartoon as an
istic, educational, and entertainment medium is in its infancy. Its maturity
›ends on you.

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Classical Music and Hollywood Cartoons

A Primer on the Cartoon Canon

by DANIEL GOLDMARK

AT THIS VERY moment, people of all ages throughout the United States—in fact, all over the world—are learning the rudiments of "classical music," that all-encompassing genre distinction that includes music not just from the so-called Classical era of the mid- to late eighteenth century, but music from about the 1700s clear through to the turn of the twentieth century as well. But they aren't learning about Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt in the classroom or the concert hall; no, scads of people are getting their first exposure to such composers from animated cartoons. From *Rhapsody in Rivets* to *Fantasia 2000*, classical music has always been essential to the sound of the Hollywood cartoon, giving directors and writers story ideas while simultaneously providing cartoon composers with familiar—and, therefore, surefire—material for musical underscore.

The integral role of any form of music—classical or otherwise—can be seen in cartoons just by looking at their names: Silly *Symphonies*, *Musical* Miniatures, Color *Rhapsodies*, Merrie *Melodies*, and so on. These cartoons all let you know from the start that music plays a big part in their existence. Classical works found a welcome home in cartoons very early on, especially when directors could use a piece of music as the basis for a short—the original *modus operandum* for Disney's Silly Symphonies. ("Program music," with a ready-to-go plot to explain the music, was especially useful; this includes pieces like Rossini's overture to the opera *William Tell* or Mendelssohn's symphonic overture *The Hebrides*.)

While the list of classical works used in cartoons numbers in the hundreds,[1] a select few appear in short after short. These pieces have, over the years, established themselves as a veritable cartoon canon, a collection of works

whose status as animation fodder has been cemented in recent years with their inclusion in such classical CD anthologies as RCA Victor's *Cartoon Classics: Classical Favorites from Classic Cartoons* and Deutsche Grammophon's *Mad About Cartoons*, which sports the tagline "Over 70 Minutes of Digital Madness." While Rossini's *William Tell Overture* tops the list handily, its concurrent life as the theme to *The Lone Ranger* radio and television series helps to explain its popularity. Far less easy to explain, however, is a mid-nineteenth century work for piano, and later, for piano and orchestra: [illegible] Hungarian Rhapsody, a piece that has become synonymous with cartoon music.

Let's spend a moment with this piece: th[illegible] shows up as the featured work in more cartoons than any other single piece, including *Bars & Stripes* (Columbia, 1931), *Rhapsody in Rivets* (Warner Bros., 1941), *Rhapsody Rabbit* (Warner Bros., 1946), *The Cat Concerto* (MGM, 1947), *The Magic Fluke* (UPA, 1949), *The Convict Concerto* (Lantz, 1954), and even one of George Pal's Puppetoons, *Dipsy Gypsy* (Paramount, 1941; with violin work by Andre Koestelanetz). Mel Blanc, as Daffy Duck, even performed a vocalese-cum-patter song version of the Rhapsody on one of the singles Capitol Records released featuring the Looney Tunes characters in 1950, titled "Daffy Duck's Rhapsody"; likewise, when Bugs Bunny and Tweety join Doris Day and Jack Carson in a musical dream sequence in *My Dream Is Yours* (1949), their song begins as a spoof of the Rhapsody. No other piece of classical music has been so closely associated with the state of being animated.

Friz Freleng's *Rhapsody in Rivets* gives us as an ideal example of how cartoons can approach an individual piece of classical music, even if the setting is, in this case, less than refined.[2] Instead of taking place in a concert hall or outdoor auditorium, *this* performance of Liszt's Rhapsody transpires at a construction site, where the onlooking audience, peering over the privacy fence, applauds the arrival of the conductor/foreman from his dressing room/office. He is replete with long hair and a cigar—giving the performance's leader at once a touch of refinement and mundanity. With a ruler replacing a baton and the score supplanted by blueprints, the show begins with the rhapsody's familiar strains played on instruments—instruments of mass construction (sledge, jack and ball-peen hammers, cement hoppers, saws, trowels—the works) that emphasize the percussive side of Liszt's bombastic piece.

With a piece this familiar, Freleng could easily rend the rhapsody tune by tune, working o[illegible]ch visual gag mimetically with its matching melody before moving onto the next. As he put it, "[The Rhapsody is] one of my favorite numbers. I know it and I can manipulate it. I can make it stop, like a conductor. Or I can slow it down. That's one thing about the number: You can use a phrase, you can repeat it, and it still works!"[3] The Rhapsody consists of a collection of short, idiosyncratic, and interrelated melodies—making them that much easier to remember—that Liszt repeats or revisits numerous times. The repetitive nature of the piece lends itself well to a cartoon translation. Each reiterated motif allows the director to continue to hammer on a visual gag until it hits home. For example, a series of fast, upward glissandi near the Rhapsody's conclusion becomes an ideal bit of underscoring for a bricklaying octopus; the creature lays four bricks in a row, followed by a troweling of cement, precisely in concert with each phrase of the music. Freleng found such passages of the Rhapsody so visually evocative that he focused on the same moments four years later during Bugs's performance of the piece in *Rhapsody Rabbit*.

A slowly building freneticism beneath the various folklike tunes reveals the other quality of the Rhapsody that suits it to animation: its madcap, near-entropic careen into musical chaos. By its conclusion, the music comes so quickly that it's all Freleng and his builders can do to keep up with what Liszt is throwing them—making the cartoon that much funnier. If ever in doubt, speed things up.

Proof that this piece remains *the* archetypal/paradigmatic/stereotypical performance piece for cartoons—and I *do* mean a piece to be performed, not just played—appears in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988). When private detective Eddie Valiant ventures to the Ink & Paint Club for a "'Toon Revue—Strictly Humans Only," he is greeted by a four-hand performance of the Rhapsody as played by two cartoon ducks—Daffy *and* Donald—both of whom are attempting to outdo one another in a pianistic duel. (Donald, wearing a tuxedo, plays on a grand piano, while the typically nude Daffy plays a less prestigious upright.) While Valiant looks askance at the performance's explosive finale, Marvin Acme giggles, "Those ducks are funny. They never get to finish the act!" Once again, the Rhapsody is served up as *the* example of cartoon classical music. It's especially appropriate in a venue for "humans only," as we've been led to believe over the years that this is perhaps the only music cartoon characters even know!

Perhaps the greatest irony of the Rhapsody's presence in cartoons is that we cannot consider it as a masterwork of the classical canon—it's not ev[illegible]

close. It may have Liszt's parental pedigree, but it is neither serious enough, nor of the proper nationality (that is, Germanic), to fulfill the criteria held by the more austere members of the canon. Symphonies and chamber works don't typically appear in cartoons, usually because their melodies are not as easily excerpted; the theme from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony marks an obvious and important exception (particularly with its instantly identifiable four-note rhythmic/melodic motive). Instead, we find symphonic or operatic overtures and short piano pieces, all with well-known melodies and past histories of use in early film and marching bands, making up the bulk of the cartoon canon.

The overture to Rossini's opera *William Tell* tops the list, of course, but there's also his overtures to *The Thieving Magpie* and *Semiramide*; other composers include Franz von Suppé (*The Light Cavalry*; *Poet and Peasant*; *Morning, Noon, and Night in Vienna*; *Jolly Robbers*, and *Beautiful Galathea*); Felix Mendelssohn (*The Hebrides* and *Ruy Blas*); and Richard Wagner (*Rienzi*, *The Flying Dutchman*, and *Tannhäuser*). Some of the more obscure or unusual choices include works by Bederich Smetana (*The Bartered Bride*), Mikhail Glinka (*Russlan and Ludmilla*), Friedrich Flotow (*Martha*), and Ferdinand Hérold (*Zampa, the Pirate*).

While Liszt's rhapsody may hold the record for most onscreen performances in a cartoon, Figaro's first aria from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, "Largo al Factotum," certainly wins as the opera selection featured most often, either in its entirety (*Barber of Seville* [Lantz, 1944], *Magical Maestro* [MGM, 1952]) or in pieces (*You Ought to Be in Pictures* [Warner Bros., 1940], *Notes to You* and its remake, *Back Alley Oproar* [Warner Bros., 1941 and 1948], *The Whale Who Wanted to Sing at the Met* segment of *Make Mine Music* [Disney, 1946], and *Long-Haired Hare* [Warner Bros., 1949]). Once again, a mixture of the piece's stature as a popular favorite among singers and audiences alike, its easily recognizable melody that can be divided into numerous sections, and its overall quick and playful nature give it an edge over almost all other contenders. It even appears briefly in *Rhapsody Rabbit*; as Bugs reaches the end of one of Liszt's phrases on the piano that resembles the Rossini, he begins singing "Fi-ga-ro! Fi-ga-ro!" For ensemble numbers, the sextet from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* appears more often than any other; especially popular gags for this piece have all of a recently deceased cat's nine lives singing the various parts (as in the finales to *Notes to You* and *Back Alley Oproar*).

With such a variety of pieces to choose from, it's no wonder that classical tunes immediately found their way into the earliest sound cartoons, especially since all the pieces listed above were in the public domain, and would cost the typically cash-strapped animation studios nothing to license.[4] For the first decade or so after *Steamboat Willie* (1928) made sound in cartoons a necessity, all the studios used classical music to underscore scenes—western spoofs using the "Lone Ranger"/*William Tell* music, maritime moments referencing the overture to Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*—or as the inspiration for a story, either symphonic (Harman-Ising's *A Tale of the Vienna Woods* [1934]) or operatic (Lantz's *Chili con Carmen* [1930]). One particularly popular plotline involved the corruption of good (that is, classical) music with its biggest foe and rival, jazz (or swing or boogie woogie or ragtime or crooning). Hollywood features constantly played off the proponents of good and wholesome classical music against the evil forces of lasciviously dancing, morals-breaking, elders-ignoring, swing/jazz-loving kids, seen in films like *100 Men and a Girl* (1937), *Babes in Arms* (1939), and, of course, *The Jazz Singer*. As with anything else happening in Hollywood cinema, Hollywood cartoons followed suit—and then some. Some examples include a literal battle between the lands of classical and jazz in Disney's *Music Land* (1935) and Warner Bros.'s animated adaptation of *The Jazz Singer*, *I Love to Singa* (1936), a heartwarming story about the young Owl Jolson and his desire to sing "about the moon-a and the June-a and the spring-a."[5]

Then, in 1940, *Fantasia* happened. Like everyone else, the Disney studio had approached the classics faithfully and respectfully, throwing in some good-natured interruptions with cartoons like *The Band Concert*.[6] *Fantasia* forever positioned Disney on the side of highbrow music aficionados, not only by giving beautiful visual tales to go along with the musical narratives, but also by showing Disney's allegiance to such cultured personages as Leopold Stokowski and Deems Taylor. While the technological and budgetary excesses of the Fantasound system, combined with the off-putting highbrow bent of the film's overall message, meant that *Fantasia* would not financially break even for decades, the film threw down an ideological gauntlet. Naturally, other studios took up the challenge; references and jokes to Disney, especially when dealing with classical music, appeared continually through the years. The attempt to plant classical music—and by extension, the idiosyncrasies of concert hall culture—safely upon an ivory tower only meant that it had to be violated.

Warner Bros., and in particular Bob Clampett, Friz Freleng, and Chuck Jones, seemed most interested in the attack. The studio's cartoons in this vein include *Rhapsody in Rivets, A Corny Concerto* (1943), *Pigs in a Polka* (1943), *Rhapsody Rabbit, Long-Haired Hare, The Rabbit of Seville* (1950), and *What's Opera, Doc?* (1957). While these cartoons all share commonalities, each director glommed onto singular aspects of *Fantasia*'s worldly image to frustrate. Clampett's interpretations of Johann Strauss's "A Tale of the Vienna Woods" and "The Blue Danube" in *A Corny Concerto* take Disney's balletic Silly Symphonies approach to storytelling and torment it ruthlessly. Elmer Fudd's presence—in place of Deems Taylor—immediately sets the stage. He tries to describe for the audience the "whispering rhythm of the woodwinds," but his starched collar (a brilliant anti-highbrow gag) refuses to cooperate and keeps erupting from his shirt front to hit him in the face—a sign of what's to come. Bugs and Porky perform the prototypical Warner Bros. hunting sketch in "A Tale of the Vienna Woods," but Clampett's sense of humor—from Porky's holding up a sign saying "I'm Hunting That *!?@# Rabbit!" to Bugs pirouetting off at the end in a pink bra and tutu—shows that he saw the music as ripe for a less serious interpretation than Disney might attempt.

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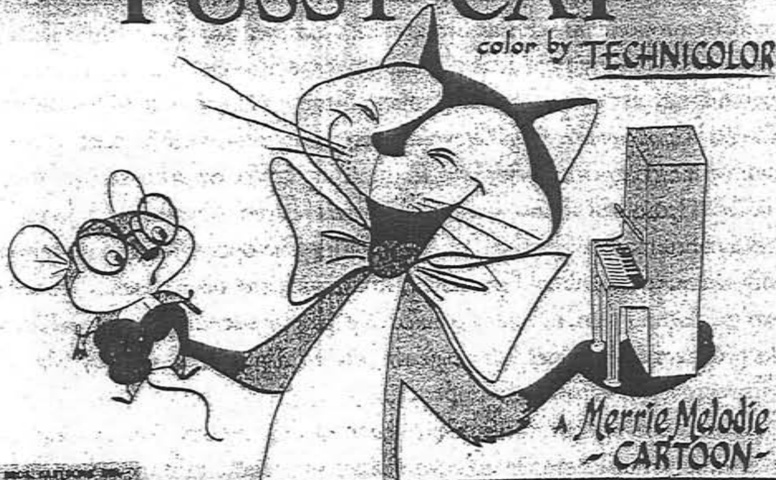
Chuck Jones's cartoons concerning classical music—all created with Mike Maltese as writer—are both the most loving and scathingly critical satires of the culture of the concert hall ever created. Of particular interest to Jones and Maltese seem to have been the artificiality of the performance of classical music and the aura of sanctity that clung to it, a cultural shield strengthened by proponents such as Stokowski. It comes as no surprise when, in *Long-Haired Hare*, Bugs makes an appearance as none other than the great man himself, as the terrified instrumentalists gasp "Leopold!" in his wake. In *The Rabbit of Seville*, Bugs likewise sidetracks a performance, with Elmer as an unwilling participant. Sticking to the safety of the overture to *The Barber of Seville* (parodied almost as often as Figaro's "Largo al Factotum"), Jones creates a contrafactum overture, an opera within the opera that has more to do with the perennial Bugs-Elmer chase than with the opera itself. The music may guide the action, but the sequence of gags (Bugs sending a snake-charmed electric razor after Elmer, Elmer getting his bald pate massaged by Bugs the Barber) is about slapstick, not opera.

What's Opera, Doc?, easily one of the most well-known short cartoons ever created, draws on a complex gathering of musical and cultural conventions to construct a generalized view of the Wagnerian universe and the world of opera as a whole. Jones's approach could not have been simpler: he took the most familiar parts of Wagner from the whole of the composer's dramatic oeuvre—including a hodgepodge of famous tunes and a set of stereotypical plot devices for a story—and poured them into the prefab form of his most famous work, *The Ring of the Niebelungen.* This allowed Jones to, as he put it, "take fourteen hours of *The Ring of the Niebelungen* and reduce it to six minutes."[7] His choice of Wagner for his operatic parody makes sense from the perspective of spectacle: Wagner's fantastic worlds of knights, goddesses, and magic made for a far richer visual presentation then the less-than-spectacular comedies of mistaken identity and class conflict associated with Rossini and other comic opera composers. Yet Wagner's vocal writing did not work well as cartoon music; his interminable melodies could not be excerpted easily. *What's Opera, Doc?* thus consists of excerpts of various orchestral portions of Wagner's operas, usually the overtures. This includes pieces of *Rienzi* (Wagner's second opera, nowadays almost totally out of circulation), *Tannhäuser, Der fliegende Holländer, Die Walküre,* and *Siegfried.* Instead of taking the *Ring* and condensing it, Jones appropriated those parts of Wagner's operas that were guaranteed to get an audience reaction. Likewise, the dramatic elements in the story do not



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come from any opera in particular, but are rather archetypical operatic situations: an overture, a love duet/dance, a show of magic, a masculine hero/warrior type on display, and a tragic death scene. In the end, Jones and writer Maltese presented their view of Wagner as they knew him, in the hopes that audiences could appreciate it from either level: highbrows could look at it as a witty play on opera with many subtle in-jokes, while non-initiates could jeer at the silly, overwrought singing and acting of *all* operas as parodied by Bugs and Elmer.

Jones's colleague at Warner Bros., Friz Freleng, also had a penchant for tackling classical themes; in Freleng's case, however, the piece itself, not necessarily the performer or the place, was the target. As with Jones, we have a satirical triptych: *Rhapsody in Rivets, Rhapsody Rabbit,* and *Pigs in a Polka.* These three cartoons not only have the same director, they share a nationality: Hungary. Both of the *Rhapsody* cartoons focus exclusively on performances of Liszt's second Hungarian Rhapsody, while *Pigs in a Polka,* the musical setting

of the Three Little Pigs, uses four of Brahms's Hungarian Dances (numbers 5, 6, 7, and 17). We also cannot forget about *Pizzicato Pussycat* (1955), which turns the Bermuda Triangle of cat, mouse, and piano—held up for all to see in the Tom & Jerry shorts *The Cat Concerto* and *Johann Mouse* (1952)—on its side. Rather than having the cat play on his own or having the mouse lead the performance astray (as in *The Cat Concerto*), here the mouse is the virtuoso (Padermouski, as the cat dubs him), while the feline simply takes advantage of the situation for some quickly gained (and even more quickly lost) fame—alas, no fortune. Perhaps even more shocking is the appearance of a distinctly non-canonic (in any sense of the term) work at the cartoon's climactic performance. At the cat's Carnegie Hall debut—for which, we see on the street poster, Leopold *Stabowski's* performance has been hastily rescheduled—the cat breaks the mouse's spectacles, causing the tiny pianist to play, as Will Friedwald has described, "frightening Cecil Taylor-like thumps which cause press and public alike to reject the miracle cat as a fraud (the squares)."[8]

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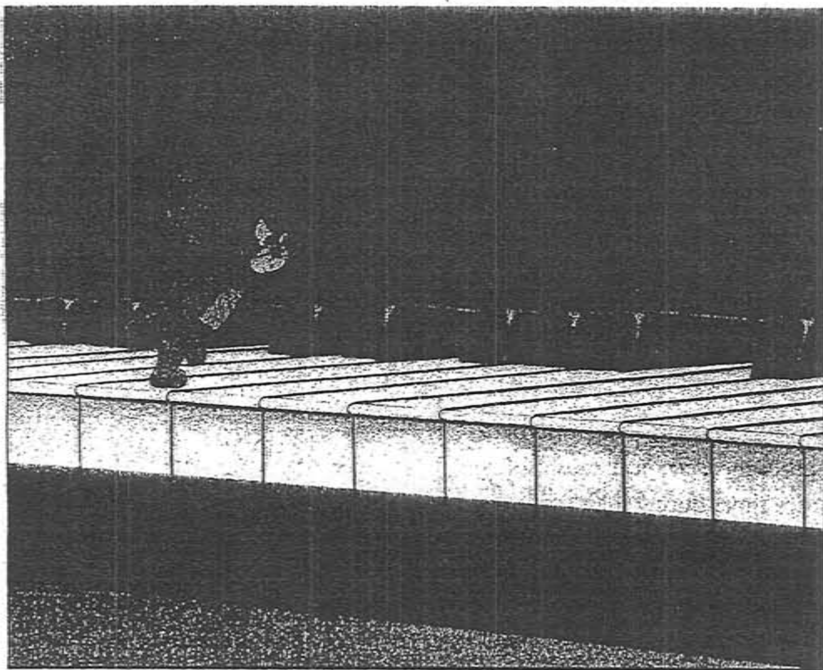
Other studios, of course, took their own approaches to the classics. Hanna and Barbera approached classical music only three times during their tenure at MGM, although the public seemed quite taken with their ideas; of the seven Academy Awards for animated short subject they won for MGM, two featured classical music: *The Cat Concerto* and *Johann Mouse. The Cat Concerto* is almost identical to *Rhapsody Rabbit* in scope, although the preexisting relationship and antagonism between Tom and Jerry makes their struggle somewhat more believable, while the rodent that interrupts Bugs's performance

seems simply an arbitrary mouse in the ointment. *Johann Mouse* places Tom and Jerry in Johann Strauss's Vienna, one of the numerous costume roles the pair would have in the 1950s (such as *Two Mouseketeers* [1952]). There is also *Tom and Jerry in the Hollywood Bowl* (1950), a cartoon that seems to have inspired Chuck Jones's *Baton Bunny* (1959): both involve the star (Tom and Bugs, respectively) leading a performance at the Bowl, only to have it led astray by Jerry in the former, an anonymous fly in the latter.

Walter Lantz's studio created the only series of shorts dedicated exclusively to classical music, the Musical Miniatures. These began in 1946 with *The Poet and Peasant*, followed by *Musical Moments from Chopin*, *Overture to William Tell*, *The Band Master*, *Kiddie Koncert*, and *Pixie Picnic*, all released from 1946 to 1948. The approach to classical music in these films—all of which were directed by Dick Lundy, who came to Lantz as an animator in late 1943 and was made a director a few months later—is to find a gag in every possible nook and cranny and not proceed to the next scene until every idea has been exhausted. Unlike Warner Bros. or Disney, Lantz used the



Jerry in *The C-- Concerto.* ©Turner Entertainment Company

orchestra pit as a place rife with high jinks—and a likely place it seemed to be, as the jokes just kept coming.

By the time television took over, assaults on specific pieces of music—or even on concert hall culture in general—occurred less often, due in part to the slowly waning popularity of high art music in the United States. This does not mean that cartoons don't still take on opera and orchestras: the plot of an early episode of *The Flintstones* ("The Flintstone Flyer") involves Wilma and Betty going to the opera while Barney supposedly cares for an ill Fred. *The Simpsons* regularly includes references or outright jokes about classical music and opera; at a performance of *Carmen* during the first-season episode "Bart the Genius," Lisa tells Homer that a large singer is the bullfighter, causing Bart to retort "No way a bull's gonna miss a target *that* big, man!!!"

To this day, pieces such as the overtures to *William Tell* and *The Barber of Seville*, Liszt's Rhapsody, and even the Valkyrie leitmotif from Wagner's *Die Walküre* (in Elmer Fudd's voice—"Kill the WA-bbit!") cannot be divorced from the images created for them in cartoons. Indeed, I became a musician because I wanted to learn to play a piece I had heard in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. This phenomenon (and it is a phenomenon—other people have told me similar stories over the years) shows that the imaginary world of animation really does fit well with classical music—a point Disney tried to make more than sixty years ago with *Fantasia*. With cartoons like *What's Opera, Doc?* and *Fantasia* as popular as they've ever been, classical music will never die—just like any other cartoon character.

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[1] While a surfeit of dramatic and chamber works from the classical tradition have found new lives in cartoons, only a handful of traditional "classical" composers ever wrote music for use in cartoons. The few examples include Paul Hindemith, whose player-piano score for *Felix at the Circus* (1927) is presumed lost; Dimitri Shostakovich, whose scores for the animated shorts *The Tale of the Priest and His Servant Balda* (op. 36, 1934) and *The Silly Little Mouse* (op. 56, 1939) were recently recorded (the latter for the first time ever) on *Shostakovich: Film Music* (Citadel CTD 88129); Paul Dessau, the German composer whose semi-improvised scores for several pre-synchronized-sound Disney "Alice Comedies" still exist; and Alfred Schnittke, another Russian composer who wrote music for such cartoons as *Butterfly* and *Glass Harmonica*. There also exists a classical work whose origins in animation have been misstated: Sergey Prokofiev's symphonic fairy tale *Peter and the Wolf*, which figured largely in the Disney musical compilation film *Make Mine Music* (1946), came into this world as a dramatic work for the Moscow Children's Musical Theatre in 1936. Only after its success did it become a candidate for a Disney treatment a decade later.