



*Raffaella:*

## BALLETIC EULOGY TO A BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER

June 29 and 30 saw the world premiere in South Bend, Indiana, of *Raffaella: A New Fairytale Ballet*, with choreography by Claire Kretzschmar, set design by Gabrielle Stroik Johnson, and music by Michael Kurek.<sup>1</sup>

Why South Bend, and why a “fairytale ballet”? South Bend was the hometown of Raffaella Maria Stroik, who is the eponymous heroine of the ballet. On November 14, 2018, the body of the 23-year-old ballerina was found in a lake in Mark Twain State Park, about 120 miles northwest of Saint Louis, where Raffaella danced with the Saint Louis Ballet. Her mysterious death has been called an accidental drowning after no evidence of foul play was discovered. The young ballerina—a fervent Catholic—had traveled to the park to make a personal retreat. Raffaella had adopted as her own the adage of Dostoevsky’s Prince Myshkin, “Beauty will save the world”, and in her life she sought to embody this through her deep love for her Savior Jesus Christ and her choice of ballet as a career through which to manifest in her life the beauty of Christ.

Raised in a loving family, with two brothers and three sisters, Raffaella was the daughter of Duncan and Ruth Stroik, of South Bend, Indiana. Duncan Stroik is a renowned architect, especially of church buildings, and a longtime professor of Classical architecture at the University of Notre Dame. The Stroik family were devastated at their loss of Raffaella, but one day Ruth had an idea.

Less than six months after Raffaella’s death, the grieving couple were at a hotel in Saint Louis, preparing to meet with a detective. As she lay in bed, Ruth had a sort of vision in which Raffaella’s “whole life came to me like different parts of ballets. She had a moment of *Sleeping Beauty* in her life, or a moment of *Giselle*, or she had a moment of *Esmeralda* . . . all the different classical ballets.



. . . I said to Duncan: Raffaella’s life was like a tragic ballet.” Duncan affirmed Ruth’s vision and formed a scenario, or libretto, for a ballet. Duncan added: “We could see in our daughter’s life those connections to the heroic aspects of ballets that are in our lives. . . . We’re inspired by Raffaella’s life that has aspects that remind you of great ballets. . . . [The libretto] isn’t meant to be the history of Raffaella’s life but it *is* inspired by her life.”

After the ballet’s libretto was trimmed to make it compact enough for use as a ballet, it was ready to be set to music. Raffaella was a great lover of classical ballet with music in the tradition of Romantic composers such as Tchaikovsky (*Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Nutcracker*), Adolphe Adam (*Giselle*), and Léo Delibes (*Coppélia*); thus the *Raffaella* ballet had to follow that model in its scenario, music, choreography, and costumes.

Now the Stroiks began the search for a composer, and after several recommendations, they found Michael Kurek. After listening online to Kurek’s Symphony No. 2: *Tales from the Realm of Faerie*, Duncan knew he had found the ideal composer for the *Raffaella* ballet.<sup>2</sup> Michael produced a marvelous score with much beauty and variety in the music. For the ballet’s premiere in South Bend, the orchestra consisted of 42 instruments, but for the subsequent recording, the full complement of 92 instruments will be used.

Following the outline of Duncan Stroik’s libretto, I will give a very condensed version of the ballet’s story, along with a very few brief comments on Michael Kurek’s musical score. Running throughout the score in many scenes are segments of two Gregorian chants, which I believe act not only as sym-

bols of various elements in the ballet's story, but also as a reminder of Raffaella's fervent Catholic faith. These chants are the simple *Salve Regina* and the famous *Pange lingua gloriosus*, with lyrics by Saint Thomas Aquinas. *Pange lingua* is traditionally sung on Holy Thursday during the procession of the Blessed Sacrament to the altar of repose. Many people also know this melody as *Tantum ergo*, which is the fifth stanza of *Pange lingua*, and which is frequently sung at Benediction. Like the early twentieth-century Italian composer Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936), Michael Kurek has a gift for orchestration and his incorporation of Gregorian chant into the orchestral texture makes him, in my estimation, a latter-day Respighi.<sup>3</sup> So, let us now travel back in time to eighteenth-century Italy for the story of Raffaella.

## ACT I: Village of San Michele and the Lakeside

### Prologue: *The Miraculous Birth*

Soft, tremolo violins and violas signal the beginning of the ballet's Prologue, set at dusk as Raffaella's parents emerge onto the balcony to take joy in the birth of their daughter. The music increases in volume and splendor as they esteem three statues of archangels. As Raffaella's parents retire to bed, the angels come alive.

### Scene I: *Intro*

Through alternation of quick triple and duple meters, the full orchestra portrays the jubilant dancing of San Michele's villagers as Raffaella's parents announce the birth of their baby girl.

### Scene II: *The Mysterious Man*

The dynamic, joyful, dance-like character of the music changes as the villagers' revelry ceases. A choir of brass instruments announce the solemn approach of a mysterious old man. Handing Raffaella's parents a golden rose, he foretells her future as a beautiful girl who will create beauty in everyone's lives. During this prophecy, a majestic man robed in white enters, yet no one can see him. The invisible Prince dances in the village square, where he is joined by the three archangels, the scene ending in a splendid and majestic C major.

### Scene III: *Raffaella's Birthday—Raffaella is 16 years old*

The scene begins gently, in F major, de-

picting Raffaella dancing in the village square on the morning of her birthday. As villagers arrive in the square to begin their workday, the music gradually accelerates. Raffaella's dance also increases to a more jubilant tempo and we see her burgeoning love for ballet. The scene ends as it began, with the delicate, slow dance in F.

### Scene IV: *Children's Dance*

When Raffaella turns around, she sees the village children, along with her younger sister, and she gives each one a white rose from the bouquet her father had given her. As the scene begins, the orchestra uses string tremolo, harp and a delicate trio of two flutes and a clarinet to represent the children's dance and their homage to Raffaella. After the villagers return to work, Raffaella enters the village church to pray.

### Scene V: *Raffaella Meets the True Prince*

As Raffaella prays in the church, we hear hints of a Gregorian chant—the simple *Salve Regina*—which will return later. Dressed in white, the Prince appears and invites Raffaella to dance. He teaches Raffaella a particular dance, then he departs.

### Scene VI: *Raffaella Shares the Dance She Learned*

Raffaella teaches several villagers the dance that the Prince taught her, but because he is invisible they find it hard to grasp who this mysterious Prince is. The village men are captivated by her dancing, but Raffaella rejects their advances. She announces her love for this invisible Prince. Near the beginning of this scene, the beginning of the Gregorian chant *Pange lingua* is heard over the galloping, dotted dance rhythms. A phrase from *Salve Regina* now returns, first in the flutes and oboes, it then alternates with *Pange lingua*. The scene ends with the return of *Salve Regina*.

### Scene VII: *A Picnic for Raffaella*

The family go for a picnic at a lake in the vicinity of their village. When they return, the local florist has an accident with her cart and Raffaella moves quickly to save her sister from being hit by the cart.

### Scene VIII: *Fight with the Rival Village*

The final scene of Act I involves an attack on the village by men from a nearby rival village. Vengeful emotions flare and a sword fight ensues until the Duke of San Michele

arrives to quell the violence. Beginning with tranquil music of Raffaella's family preparing to return home from the village, the music of this scene soon becomes percussive and dissonant, graphically depicting the anger and violence of the two rival villages. After the duke's dispersal of the gangs, the music once again becomes tranquil—with a gossamer texture of harp and celesta over tremolo strings—as Raffaella stays behind and finds the mysterious golden rose.

## ACT II: Rome, Village of San Michele, Lakeside

### Scene I: *Sightseeing in Rome—Raffaella is 22 years old*

Raffaella and her family travel to Rome and while there she sees a school of ballet directed by the Emerald Queen, who is a renowned ballet teacher. Raffaella requests to take the Queen's class and she is accepted as a student. The Queen exhorts her to commit to regular and diligent practice. *Pange lingua* is heard at the beginning of this scene.

### Scene II: *The Emerald Queen*

The Queen gives an example to everyone of her own accomplished ballet technique. For the dance of the Emerald Queen, Michael Kurek has adapted a movement for cello and harp from his own *Serenade for Violoncello and Harp*. Instead of the full orchestra, the pared-down texture of cello and harp emphasizes the Queen's dignity and the subtlety of her choreography.

### Scene III: *The Emerald Queen Teaches Raffaella*

The Queen recognizes Raffaella's gift for ballet and helps her to grow and mature as a dancer. It is here, at the ballet school, that Raffaella meets an attractive young man who wants to marry her and he promises that she will be his queen. He gives her a dark crown studded with jewels. Raffaella is charmed by him, but feels ambivalent. The beauty of the Emerald Queen's teaching and the charm of the young man are reflected in the waltz-time character of the orchestra.

### Scene IV: *The False Prince Revealed*

When Raffaella declines the offer of the dark crown, the young man instantly changes and becomes offended. He denounces her for rejecting him, and his behavior reveals him as the False Prince. Now we will see—and hear—the revelation of the False Prince. Raffaella, in her anguish, prays for help, and

the True Prince arrives with his angels. They vanquish the False Prince, who then vanishes with his demons. Part of the *Salve Regina* melody makes a brief appearance. During this scene with the False Prince, the orchestral harmonies and texture become laden with creepy dissonances. His real personality appears from behind the charming façade.

**Scene V: Relief Pas de Deux**

Raffaella and the True Prince dance in thanksgiving for their triumph over the False Prince. The first and second lines of *Pange lingua* are heard in this *pas de deux*. Having returned home to her village, Raffaella is misunderstood by the villagers, who cannot understand how she can have fallen in love with an invisible man. She goes to the lake so that she can reflect on recent events.

**Scene VI: A New Kingdom**

As Raffaella thinks over all that has happened, she even has thoughts of the False Prince, but happily the True Prince arrives to comfort her. As it begins to snow, he bids her to join him in his kingdom. Her deep love for the Prince helps her to quiet her

apprehensions about leaving her family, and she decides to go with him. Raffaella bids farewell to her family and the Prince takes her to his realm. From there she will always be able to bless the world with beauty.

Raffaella Stroik was, by all accounts, an exceptional ballerina and an exceptional person. Her fellow dancers recognized in her a unique purity, joy, and goodness, which infused everything she did. Many in the ballet's cast had previously danced with Raffaella and wanted to be part of this new, fairytale ballet honoring her. In her life, she had been transformed and transfigured by the glorious power of beauty and by the true prince, the mysterious giver of all beauty. Those who experience the ballet may meditate on the rich symbolism of the tale, and delve into its meaning for each of us.

*Susan Treacy, a musicologist and Professor of Music, Emerita, at Ave Maria University, is the author of The Music of Christendom: A History (Ignatius Press).*

**References**

1. More about Michael Kurek in the pages of StAR: "Reimagining Shakespeare's Macbeth as a Ballet: Susan Treacy Interviews Composer Michael Kurek," StAR, Vol. 16, No. 2 (March/April 2016), pp. 28–29; Michael Kurek, "The Reunion of the Good and the Beautiful: A Composer's Journey," StAR, Vol. 17, No. 4 (July/August 2017), pp. 24–28; "Richard Wagner: The Controversy Continues," StAR, Vol. 17, No. 5 (September/October 2017), p. 44; "The Sea Knows: A New Kind of Nashville Sound" (November/December 2017); "Michael Kurek and The Sound of Beauty" (March/April 2020); "Announcing a New Album of Music by Michael Kurek" (September/October 2022).

2. To listen, visit [michaalkurek.com](http://michaalkurek.com). For my review of Symphony No. 2, see "Announcing a New Album of Music by Michael Kurek", StAR (September/October 2022).

3. Just one example: In the second movement of *Respighi's Pines of Rome*, he has a trumpet play the *Sanctus IX* from the Mass *Cum jubilo*, for feasts of the Blessed Virgin. Respighi incorporated chant into many of his other works.