

From the Program Notes for the *Opera San José* Production, November 2022

### **How long did it take you to write it?”**

When people ask me “how long does it take to write an opera?” I have to smile, thinking to myself: “if you could only imagine...!” The opera *Cinderella* has accompanied me since I was eight years old, and I have been working on it seriously from the age of ten until I was sixteen. So I have grown up with this opera, and this opera has grown up with me.

Cinderella was my favourite fairy-tale when I was a little child. I was enthralled by the girl who defies oppression and finally triumphs. Many of the stories I loved most as a child were based on the same idea. *A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett – a Victorian Cinderella story – was perhaps my all-time favourite. In fact, the first opera I composed when I was seven, a mini-opera (of 12 minutes) called *The Sweeper of Dreams*, was also based on a Cinderella-like plot: a young girl applies to become a dream-sweeper, but is initially dismissed by three male executives because she is guilty of two things: she’s young and she’s “a female”. Through her talent and determination, she overcomes their prejudice and finally gets the job.



*My drawing of Cinderella and her stepsisters when I was six. The stepsisters are on the right, Cinderella on the left, tall and thin, with the crown on her head. She’s bending her head because I ran out of space at the top of the paper...*

So it was entirely obvious that my first full-length opera would be Cinderella. But there was one aspect of the fairy-tale that I really didn’t like: the glass slipper. Why should the size of Cinderella’s feet prove that she’s worthy of the Prince? Why does shoe size matter anyway?

The reason turns out to be that the Cinderella story is a cultural import from China. The earliest known version of the story is a Chinese fairy-tale from more than a thousand years ago, about a girl called Ye Xian, who also flees in haste from a royal festival and leaves one slipper behind. In the Chinese story, it's the King, not the Prince, who looks for the girl with this slipper. But the rest is roughly the same – except for one huge difference: in Chinese culture, the slipper and the dainty foot actually made sense. A small foot was traditionally seen in China as the mark of feminine nobility and beauty. For centuries, young women in China used to bind their feet in order to keep them unnaturally small. So for the people at the time, Ye Xian's small feet really would have been proof of her true nobility. But once this story was imported from China to Europe, where small feet were not a sign of anything in particular, the story was stuck with a nonsensical ending. And especially in the version of the Grimm Brothers, where the stepsisters hack off their own toes, it was not just silly, but rather grim.

I wanted none of that. Firstly, I wanted the plot of my *Cinderella* to revolve around music. I also wanted Cinderella to be a talented girl – a composer. I wanted the Prince to fall in love with her because of her talent, not because of her shoe-size. So in my version of the story, the Prince searches for Cinderella not with a shoe, but with a melody!

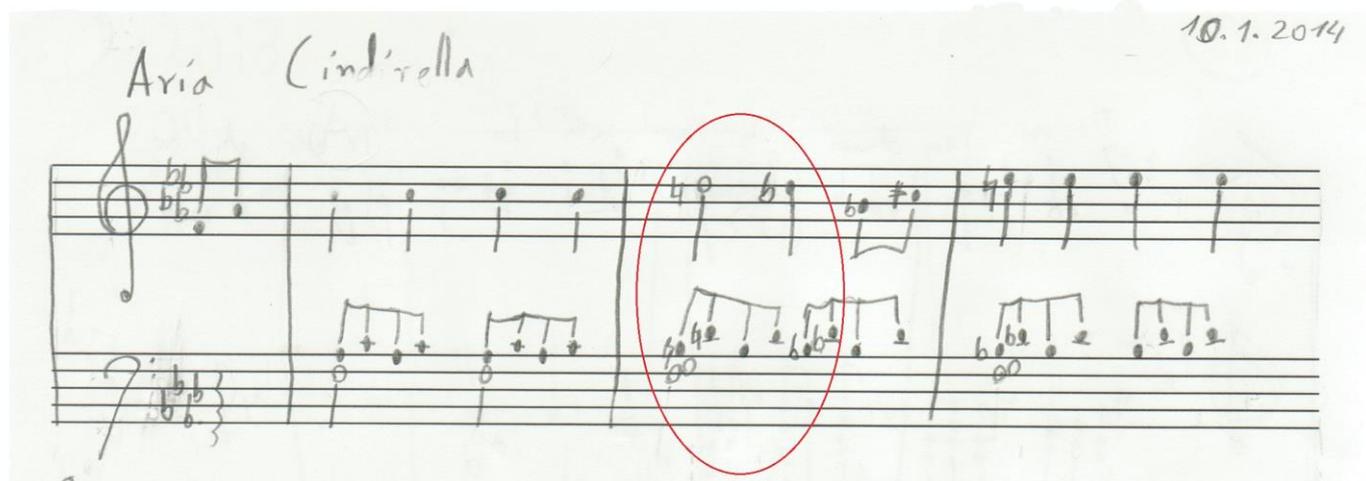
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When I was young, I invented an imaginary country called *Transylvanian*. I don't know why I chose this name - it has nothing to do with the region of Romania called Transylvania, and it has nothing to do with vampires... I always used to correct the adults when they got it wrong: "my country is called 'Transylvania**N**' not 'Transylvania'". My imaginary country was full of imaginary composers, each with a distinct style of music. Sometimes I would steal their best tunes and use them in my own compositions.



The Royal Emblem of the Kingdom of Transylvanian. (© Katharine Scarfe Beckett)

One of the most distinguished composers in Transylvanian was called Antonin Yellowsink. I wrote a biography of Antonin when I was younger. He often composed melancholy music, and there was one particularly sad melody of his that I decided to use for the plot of my *Cinderella*.



The melody with Antonin's Chord (in red)

The beginning of Antonin's melody is very simple – the first six notes are just based on the F-minor triad. But then a haunting chord intrudes: a G-major chord over an F in the bass. It sounds very painful, especially when it resolves into a G-diminished chord over the F in the bass. I called this special chord “Antonin's Chord”, and decided that it would serve as the substitute for the glass slipper.

Just before she flees, Cinderella sings this melody to the Prince – it's her enigmatic explanation for why she has to leave. The Prince is haunted by this melody, but he can only remember the beginning. He remembers that the melody went on in a very unusual and haunting way, but he can't remember exactly how. Desperately thinking how he will ever find the girl again, he eventually hits on the idea that he will sing the beginning of the tune to every girl in the kingdom, and only the girl he met at the ball will know how to continue it. In this way, Antonin's chord replaces the slipper in my opera. (Although the shoe has not been tossed away completely, as you'll see.)

*Alma*

October 2022