

# The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



October 1, 2018

Issue 2: *Of Fashions and Fates*

On January 25, 1875, the Czech conductor Eduard Francevič Nápravník premiered the opera *Demon* by famed Russian conductor and composer Anton Rubenstein (1829-1894). Though not generally known for his operas, he composed more than a dozen of them between 1849 and 1888. The



Anton Rubenstein

performance history of *Demon* (or sometimes “*The Demon*”) has been spartan over the last 143 years, with only a few stagings in Europe and the United States, the last of which was slated for 2015, but not in its fully orchestrated form. This summer the opera was “resurrected,” if we might

use that paradoxical term for a demon and his opera. I managed to get in on a weekend showing of the work at Bard College’s superb annual summer music festival, this year focusing on Rimsky-Korsakov and the Russian schools of 19<sup>th</sup> century music. And though the stagecraft, effects, acting, and overall aesthetics of the opera were singularly breathtaking and enjoyable, the combination of musicality within the cavernous and equally exquisite Frank Gehry-designed Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, in a darkened space for several hours proved deadeningly somniferous for New York’s artistic crowds—and myself. Nearly a half hour into the first act, I turned to my right, my left, behind me, and in front of me, and beheld at least seven co-aficionados in “snoriffic somnification.” This doesn’t mean that they were *not* enjoying the opera. It is to say that like the great Rossini quote about Wagner: some music has lovely moments, with some dreadful quarter hours!—certain things come in doses and can only be truly appreciated in their wholeness. This is true of many cultural

institutions: museums, art spaces, concert halls, and even libraries. As we think about these things, we need to consider how we approach such enterprises and whether they are what we might consider “fashion” or “fate.” That is, are the methods or practices we employ merely part of what is “happening” or “new” in the arts, museums, or libraries world? Or, are there certain things that are beyond our control and simply fated to an existence that has defined institutions for centuries?

This point also extends to what is in the library and its collections. Not all libraries inspire, nor do all collections enlighten. In fact, there are those bibliographic institutions that may in fact encourage sleepiness, fatigue, and exhaustion—perhaps even disinterest. When I was looking for colleges decades ago, I remember going on a library tour at a university, where the architects and interior designers consulted with behavioral



Bridwell’s Classic Chairs

psychologists, who said that bright and colorful couches would be best for keeping students attentive. Little did they realize that the couches they designed were

incredibly comfortable and became the most desired places on campus for students to take naps! Bridwell Library has no such couches or chairs—our colors and styles are far more traditional. Imaginably, though, if Bridwell chairs were placed in a dark theater and we were subject to a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian opera, we too might fall victim to sleep.



The quest for good space and comfortable seating also relates to what I see as an organic approach to both research and learning, as well as our holistic approach to how we see arts and music in the world. I know that many times when I attend a concert, I am not completely enamored of a certain performance, whether the style or composer. I have a friend who is a brilliant classical musician, but he cares little for the traditional “slow movements” of sonatas, symphonies, and concerti. Every institution or library or museum has its parts like a symphony, and we cannot and will not enjoy every aspect, but it is the holistic experience of being in that space. Many of us can probably relate



“Ellington,” our foster Steinway

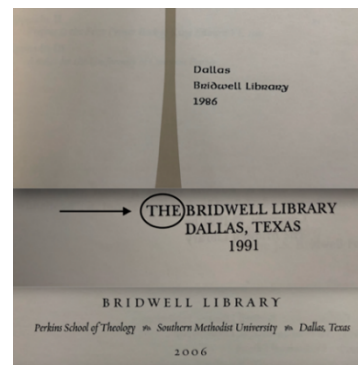
to the same feelings as my old friend—they might not like Bruckner’s Adagio/Adante movement to the 2<sup>nd</sup> symphony, but they enjoyed the experience of attending the

concert itself. This is not to say that any musical component *must* be boring. Certainly not! Merely, like many things, the parts may be different from the whole. As we think about this, and especially the musical component that relates to Bridwell, let me introduce you to a short-term resident in our Red Room—a beautiful light brown Steinway grand piano, which we are “fostering” for a few months, while the Perkins Chapel is being renovated. Our own Jane Elder has appropriately named the piano “Ellington,” so please stop by and visit. We are planning a chamber music concert for the evening of Nov. 14<sup>th</sup>—so stay *tuned* for details.

When we are dealing with any kind of culture—artistic, material, musical, bibliographic—we need to look at what we have in new ways now and again. The Bard Summer Festival has done just that for nearly three decades, through reinterpretations of Brahms and Beethoven, to explorations of lesser known musicians from Latin America, like the Mexican composer Carlos Antonio de Padua Chávez (1899-1978), whom they featured in 2015. It is not that libraries or museums are somehow

inherently boring—how dare we! But there may be a sense that libraries are relics of a long past era, no longer serving the purpose of what they once did. Instead, libraries are asking “what *can* we do...in addition?” This is where the “fashion” and “fate” question comes in.

In the attempt to do things differently, institutions change for various reasons—is this fashion, or is this fate? Let’s look at a case near and dear to us. Here is a question, good reader: What do Russian opera and Bridwell library have in common? Hint: “*The* Bridwell library.” See the photo. The connection is the definite article—“*the*”. You see,



The “The” Controversy (Exhibit A)

in the Russian language, there is no definite article. “Then how did they get *The Brothers Karamazov* or *The Gulag Archipelago*?” you ask. Of course, these are definite articles. The thing is, though, in Russian there are actually ways to *translate* expressions to include the definite article by context, but there is no word per se that indicates this. By contrast, in English, we *do* very much have the definite article and enjoy using it. That’s where we get to “The Bridwell”—or as I like to call it: the “the” controversy. Let me explain. At the time J.S. Bridwell endowed the library we now know as “Bridwell,” the official documents of the institution call the library simply “Bridwell Library.” Over the years this was used fairly regularly, though as we might imagine, people encountering our library threw in a “the” here and there. We might say there is precedent, as well as tonal aesthetic reasons for this: *the* Bridwell for many people is easier to say than simply Bridwell. The variance in how the library has been identified goes back to the 1980s, when over the course of different administrations, the official descriptors of the library swung from the more austere New Englandy use of “the” to the more legalistic interpretation of our founders’



designation without the article. Linguistically, having neither “a” or “the” is called “zero article.” As you can see from our last image, our official publications have gone from using “Bridwell” to “The Bridwell” and back to “Bridwell.” I will say that we will continue to use the latter as our official designation, though I will admit that I prefer what sounds to be easier to say—that is “the Bridwell.” The fact that I am consciously making this decision *not* to use the article is sometimes frustrating, because it doesn’t offer parity with other major libraries, such as *the Burke (Columbia)*, *the Morgan*, *the Getty*, *the Beinecke (Yale)*, *the Bodleian (Oxford)*, and even *the DeGolyer* here at SMU. So for us, it’s hard to say if this is a “fashion” as what to call our library, or “fate,” as in what people will call it will be what is easiest and most natural.

The line between “fashion” and “fate” may be narrow in some cases, and by no means are these meant to be opposing equivalents. Rather, they possess qualities about which and how we interact with our work, our world, and our lives.



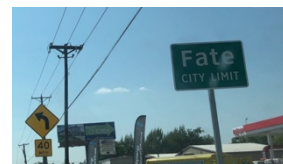
Again, fashion or fate? A few weeks ago I’d been out walking one morning, and came upon a curious marker on the ground of a local park—it read “ARNOLD RAMSDEN, “Mr. Soccer” April 30, 1886-Jan. 6, 1966 – This tree planted in loving memory, your devoted family.” Touching. Yet, when I looked up, I realized that after 50 years, there was no more tree left! I have always thought of my father as “Mr. Soccer,” as he played at the highest levels in Europe in the 1960s, but on this morning, when I saw this other “Mr. Soccer,” Arnold Ramsden’s treeless tribute, it made me think about how often we see these reminders, mementos, and tributes, but don’t always stop to read them. In the courtyard outside of Bridwell and the Perkins Chapel, we have several of these such memorial markers. They remind me of markers I

have seen in places like the Florida beach communities along the Gulf of Mexico, those retirement communities where someone’s grandparents sat on long windswept afternoons, watching seagulls and curling waves come upon the beach. In those places I would walk and see hundreds of these markers. Our own markers on campus remind us of those who have been important in our community, and whom we don’t want to forget. Somehow the physicality of brass and stone provide us with a sense of permanence and quotidian remembrance, even for those who had never known the person now gone.



Though these are themselves a “fashion” of sorts, they also remind us of what “fate” has for us, but also how things as diverse as trees, operas, and libraries all present us with distinct meanings and purposes in our lives, which make up who we are as whole people and whole communities.

Let me leave you today with a surprising encounter I recently had. I’d been driving east of Dallas, and



Fate, Texas

by chance drove by a small town with an unusual name. What on earth could have brought me here!? It

was fate, indeed. Fate, Texas. A *fashionable* little town. Let’s not forget that fashion and fate come together in surprising places, and when they do, we might not always be prepared for them. But we shall do our best.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

Anthony J. Elia, Director and J.S. Bridwell Foundation Endowed Librarian

[aelia@smu.edu](mailto:aelia@smu.edu)

