

DOMINICK ARGENTO *Valentino Dances* (1994)

BORN: October 27, 1927, in York, Pennsylvania

WORK COMPOSED: 1993 (*The Dream of Valentino*, opera); 1994 (*Valentino Dances*)

WORLD PREMIERE: July 13, 1994, in Minneapolis at Orchestra Hall; David Zinman conducting the Minnesota Orchestra

Dominick Argento could very well be considered a Minnesota composer as he has been living in the state since 1958. A rarity in the modern age, Argento was self-taught in music theory and analysis. He showed an early interest in music that involved reading Gershwin's biography, writings by Stravinsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov's book on orchestration. At the age of 16 he began piano lessons and after his high school graduation he was drafted into the army. He served as a cryptographer in North Africa during the last few months of World War II and after the war, using the GI Bill of Rights, entered the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore as a pianist, but quickly decided to switch to composition. Argento earned his bachelor's (1951) and his master's (1953) degrees from Peabody, where one of his instructors was Henry Cowell. He also spent a year in Florence on a scholarship of the US-Italy Fulbright Commission where he studied briefly with Luigi Dallapiccola. Argento received his Ph.D. from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where he studied with Alan Hovhaness and Howard Hanson. After the completion of this program he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to study for another year in Florence.

After completing his study in Florence, Argento accepted a position to teach theory and composition at the University of Minnesota in 1958. Although he first resisted the move, within a few years he was made to feel very welcome in Minnesota and soon received commissions from virtually every major performing group. His wife and muse, soprano Carolyn Bailey, frequently performed his works. Argento holds the position of Professor Emeritus at the University of Minnesota and lives in Minneapolis (his wife died on February 2, 2006).

Argento's output is extensive with no less than nine operas, over fifteen major choral works, numerous orchestral works, and a large number of song cycles including *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* which won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for Music. His opera *The Dream of Valentino* provides the content for his orchestral suite *Valentino Dances*.

The short and tragic life of Rodolfo Alfonso Raffaello Pierre Filibert Guglielmi di Valentina d'Antonguella, better known as Rudolph Valentino (May 6, 1895-August 23, 1926), is great fodder for an opera. He had the status of the quintessential romantic leading man and his untimely death at the age of 31 caused mass hysteria among his female fans.

Valentino arrived at Ellis Island in 1913 and soon ran out of money living in New York City. After supporting himself with odd jobs here and there, he landed work at Maxim's Restaurant-Cabaret as a *taxi dancer* (a paid dance partner on a dance-to-dance basis). After a huge scandal involving a Chilean heiress and her estranged husband, whom she later murdered, Valentino found himself unemployable. By the end of 1917 he was in California and within two years had carved out a career in bit parts. While in Florida to film *Stolen Moments*, Valentino read the novel *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and discovered that Metro had bought the film rights. He sought out Metro's office hoping for a part in the film, only to discover that the screenwriter June Mathis wanted to cast him as Julio Desnoyers, one of the leads. The movie was released in 1921 and was the first film to make over a million dollars at the box office! It also made Valentino a household name.

After making a few more very successful films Valentino knew he was a valuable commodity but he declared that he wasn't being compensated as such (in 1922 he was earning \$1,250 per week, \$7,000 per week less than Mary Pickford made in 1916). He sued the studio, which resulted in bad publicity (the average American at this time was hardly making \$2,000 a year) and put Valentino about \$80,000 in debt. To pile on the misery, the studio extended his contract. This meant that he was prevented from accepting employment from any other studio – and he was in great demand! After a successful tour as a spokesman with a dance group, Valentino returned to accept an offer from Ritz-Carlton Pictures (working with his studio Famous Players) that included a

two-picture deal with Famous Players and four pictures for Ritz-Carlton. He would have creative control, do the filming in New York and be paid \$7,500 a week. His few subsequent films were not box-office hits. However, Valentino was still in demand and while he was doing his first film under this new contract he was approached by Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks about joining United Artists. In 1925, after being released from his contract with Ritz-Carlton, Valentino signed a \$10,000 a week contract for three films per year.

Within a year he was dead. He collapsed on August 15, 1926, in New York and was diagnosed with appendicitis and gastric ulcers (a condition now known as *Valentino's syndrome*). He required an immediate operation and developed peritonitis. His condition worsened and on August 23 he fell into a coma and died a few hours later. Over 100,000 people lined the streets of Manhattan to pay their respects at his funeral.

Argento describes the programmatic material for *The Dream of Valentino* and *Valentino Dances* in his autobiography *Catalogue Raisonné as Memoir*:

The opera contains three tangos, each associated with a different stage of Valentino's career: the first as a newly arrived immigrant working as a taxi dancer [a skilled dancer paid to be a dance partner at a social dance] in New York; the second at a Hollywood party given by Alla Nazimova during which he proposes to and is accepted by Natasha; the third after an injunction bans his participation in films and he is forced to perform in vaudeville houses to earn his living. In *Valentino Dances* (the word dances is intended here as a verb, not a plural noun), all three tangos are presented in that chronological order, but other material is introduced as well. The suite also includes what amounts to a concertante role for an instrument I had never used before: the piano accordion.

— Vincent Osborn © 2017

Dominick Argento = *Valentino Dances*. Tonight's performance of this work is the first by the DSSO. The only other work by Argento performed by the Orchestra is the Overture to *The Boor*. It was given on February 12, 1994, Taavo Virkhaus conducting.

Instrumentation: Two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, english horn, two clarinets (2nd doubling bass clarinet), two Bassoons (2nd doubling contrabassoon), alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, Tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, tambourine, glockenspiel, tam tam, cymbals, bell tree, castanets, claves, maracas, suspended cymbal, snare drum, bass drum), accordion, harp, piano, and strings.