# GRAND FANTASY ON ROSSINI'S SEMIRAMIDE

ROBERT STALLMAN

FOR FLUTE (OR PICCOLO)
AND PIANO

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### PROGRAM NOTES

Virtuoso flutist Robert Stallman (1946–2019) won accolades throughout his fifty-year performing career for what *Gramophone* called his "tonal bloom and subtlety," or the *New York Times* would call his "richness and variety of sound." *Traversières Magazine*, in an *Hommage* to Robert's artistry, mentions that "he had what Jean-Pierre Rampal called 'the gift of musical communication', the ability to win an entire audience with the grandest and most intimate emotions, sometimes within a single phrase or a single note." This sonic sensibility went hand in hand with an intensely felt desire to bring the music to life. Robert's enduring love for the opera was essential to this story.

At age seven, Robert lived a year in Italy, "the cradle of opera," where that spirited, oh-so-vocal approach to life took hold in an imaginative American boy enjoying Rome and Florence with his brother, hearing the ardent *cantabile* and the rhythmic *buffa* patter, tripping off the Italian tongue. Three years later, attracted by the nimble instrumental voice he heard on an LP recording, Robert would ask to play the flute. In 1957, his father's career brought the family back to Europe, this time to Strasbourg, France. A year of French immersion, with continuing flute studies and a front-row seat to hear Jean-Pierre Rampal play, gave rise to Robert's early passion for perfecting both legato and *détaché* playing. In the 1960s, he enjoyed intensive study in Rampal's summer masterclasses at the Academy in Nice, and later joined his mentor onstage in concerts at Symphony Hall, Boston and at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center in New York. On graduation from the New England Conservatory of Music, he had also spent a Fulbright year in Paris, savoring long weekly lessons with Alain Marion, who inspired flutists to think *beyond* their instrument—a vital influence for Robert, whose inner search was always for the transcendent voice that lifts music into the realm of poetry. After a decade of professional growth in Boston, in 1980 Robert moved to New York, where he attracted a number of gifted students with a series of masterclasses entitled "Going Beyond the Flute," as he encouraged the technical mastery required for this highly vocal approach to playing.

Upon entering the New York scene, Robert soon received a call from the Metropolitan Opera to fill in last minute on piccolo for a dress rehearsal and performance of *Salome*—starring Birgit Nilsson, with aging Karl Böhm on the podium. This happily initiated a decade as first substitute flutist at the Met, including stage roles, much listening, and rousing Met friendships—including one with basso Ara Berberian, who provided comp seats for performances when Robert was not on tour. A highlight of this festive chapter in his multi-faceted career included appearing as the solo flutist who led the *corps de ballet* onstage in the 1991 world premiere of John Corigliano's *Ghosts of Versailles*, surrounded by a large celebrity cast, including Marilyn Horne and a young Renée Fleming, who rushed up to the flutist in the Met cafeteria midst rehearsals to say "I just love your sound!"

Opera—the drama, the *buffa* playfulness, the soulful tenderness, the dashing irreverence, the seeming abandon—Robert loved it all. When he began an intensive study of Mozart in the early 1990s, intent on arranging Mozart as the composer himself might have wished, he came to say repeatedly, "Mozart was *always* thinking opera—almost everything he *wrote* was opera!" One might say that whatever the stylistic era, baroque to modern, Robert Stallman himself was always thinking opera. When one day I suggested the creation of his own opera fantasy, he quickly took up Gioachino Rossini's *Semiramide* as the score to explore, noting that it included so much flute and piccolo material.

Premiered in Venice in 1823, Semiramide was Rossini's last opera written for Italy, prior to his move to Paris. It quickly spread to other theaters, and the overture has remained one of Rossini's most popular. Even though it is an opera seria, based on a Voltaire tragedy, Rossini's usual buffa spirit is ever present. This rapid patter approach—already evident in comic opera of the baroque and classical periods—became highly developed in nineteenth-century opera, thanks largely to Rossini. And Rossini's infectious bravura in turn prompted the creation of many opera fantasies by piano virtuosi of his era.

Robert Stallman's *Grand Fantasy* was composed in September of 2018 and was dedicated to me in honor of our 37<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We toasted each other with Italian *prosecco*, completely unaware that this would be our last such celebration, as Robert would soon become suddenly ill and not live another year. He performed the *Fantasy* at a concert in Los Altos Hills, California on October 7, 2018, and put the finishing touches on the score shortly thereafter.

—Hannah Woods Stallman October 22, 2019

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