

Transcontinental Union

for Symphony Orchestra

by

Thomas P. Rohrer

(2004)

INSTRUMENTATION:

piccolo
flute I
flute II
oboe I
oboe II
bassoon I
bassoon II
contrabassoon (opt'l)
Bb clarinet I
Bb clarinet II

trumpet I
trumpet II
trumpet III
horn I
horn II
horn III
horn IV
trombone I
trombone II
bass trombone
tuba

violin I
violin II
viola
cello
double bass

timpani

percussion (3 players)
suspended cymbal (yarn & stick)
crash cymbal s
2 wood blocks (rubber mallets)
anvil
whip
triangle

snare drum
glockenspiel (1 of 2)

bass drum
glockenspiel (2 of 2)
castenets



Transcontinental Union was written for the Utah Division of Business and Economic Development's International Business Development Office. It serves as a musical tribute to the laborers that constructed the Transcontinental Railroad from 1863 to 1869. Thus, the work contains stereotypical "western" themes--derived from Western European heritage--along with quotes of train whistles, hammering, horses, and even a cavalry call. The extended slower section is based on the Chinese folk song, "Mowli Wha," as a symbolic musical juxtaposition of their culture in this, the greatest man-made wonder of its time.

The "Golden Spike" area near Promontory, Utah is one of the most undisturbed historical sites I have visited. One can stand in the tracks of nineteenth-century photographers and see the same landscape that they documented in the spring of 1869.

In addition to a landmark engineering feat, the Transcontinental Railroad project was collaboration on the logistical and cultural levels, as the Union Pacific Railroad Company (originating in Omaha) employed mostly Irish and the Central Pacific Railroad Company (beginning in Sacramento) hired mainly Chinese immigrants.

The two companies--although in fierce competition to lay the most track--finally came together on May 10, 1869, after five years of labor across the mountains and plains.

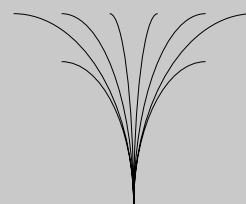
The grand ceremony marking the union of the two sides was marked by the driving of the final spikes into a California Laurel tie, which was immediately taken up, returned to California, and replaced by a standard pine tie with common spikes by Chinese workers. Subsequent events of the day were documented by a reporter from the Sacramento Daily Bee:

"That [replaced tie] was immediately attacked by hundreds of jack knives and soon reduced to a mere stick. The ever watchful Chinese then took the remains, sawed into small pieces and distributed to the spectators. The Chinese really laid the last tie and drove the last spike. When we last saw the spot, soldiers were hammering away at the flanges of the rails and carried off all the pieces they could break, so that a new rail would soon be necessary. Six ties and two rails were demolished before the juncture was left in peace to the slower inroads of time."

"J.H. Strobbridge [superintendent of the Central Pacific], when the work was all over, invited the Chinese who had been brought over from Victory [base camp] for that purpose, to dine at his boarding car. When they entered, all the guests and officers present cheered them as the chosen representatives of the race which have greatly helped to build the road...a tribute they well deserved and which evidently gave them much pleasure."

From the Sacramento Daily Bee, May 12, 1869

— Thomas P. Rohrer (August, 2004)



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