

PROGRAM NOTES

Overture plus concerto plus symphony is the tried-and-true formula for symphonic concerts, encompassing the three pillars of symphonic literature.

Not this weekend. On our all-American program Ms. Tamarkin and the CUSO have gone exploring other genres that have broadened orchestral repertoire, including ballet, film scores, Broadway, and jazz. It adds up to an ear-opening, foot-tapping collection of wonderful music.

They open with **Leonard Bernstein's Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town***, which started as a ballet, then morphed into a Broadway musical. Bernstein was a master at fusing popular and classical elements, as demonstrated in these three irresistible excerpts.

Aaron Copland's Suite from *The Red Pony* followed Bernstein's *On the Town* by just a few years – but those years were crucial because World War II had ended. He composed the original score for Lewis Milestone's 1949 film, then adapted highlights into the orchestral suite we hear. The movie's subject matter, based on a John Steinbeck story, allowed Copland to tap into one of his great strengths: capturing the soul of the American heartland in music.

Our **George Gershwin** second half opens with the ever-popular *Rhapsody in Blue*, which started as a concert piece for a jazz band. The rest, as they say, is history. From its

opening, signature clarinet flourish to its ravishing, bluesy E-major theme, *Rhapsody* is a perennial favorite. We are pleased to welcome Michael Mizrahi as soloist in his CUSO debut.

Ms. Tamarkin and the orchestra conclude the program with **Gershwin's *An American in Paris***, a 1928 tone poem celebrating *La ville lumière* – the city of light. It was, of course, adapted in the score to Vincente Minnelli's eponymous 1951 film. No one who has seen that marvelous movie can forget the magic of Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron dancing to Gershwin's splendid score.

So: ballet and Broadway, jazz, film, and tone poem – a star-studded sampler of the wonderful places we can go, all in a night of great music.

Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town*

Leonard Bernstein

Born 25 August, 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts

Died 14 October, 1990 in New York City

For those of us who grew up on the familiar tunes of *West Side Story*, it is difficult to imagine a world in which Leonard Bernstein is not a household name. In the early 1940s, however, he was not yet world famous. Bernstein enjoyed a reputation as a talented young pianist and composer whose interests were leaning more and more toward conducting. Still, his career showed tremendous promise: at age 25 he was assistant conductor of the New York

Philharmonic, and the exciting young choreographer Jerome Robbins had asked him to collaborate on a wartime ballet entitled *Fancy Free*.

The ballet's plot concerns three sailors on shore leave in pursuit of the perfect girl -- in this case, most likely, the first available attractive female. Bernstein's sophisticated, jazzy dance score was a big success at its 1944 premiere. Oliver Smith, the set designer, recognized its potential for the more commercial venue of Broadway. Bernstein worked with Smith, George Abbott, Betty Comden and Adolph Green to develop the ballet into a full-fledged musical called *On the Town* that opened in December 1944 and ran for nearly 500 performances. Purely escape theater, the upbeat, fun show was a natural for a nation weary of war and hungry for lighthearted diversion.

On the Town's music is more sophisticated than most other contemporary musicals. As John Briggs has written:

Bernstein's lively, unself-consciously jazzy score was attuned to the rhythm and tempo of the times....The man who could employ jazz idioms for abstract musical purposes could also use the devices of symphonic rhetoric to make a theatrical point.

Nowhere is this gift more evident than in the three dance episodes from *On the Town*, where Bernstein's instrumental gift has free rein. The city's vibrant pulse courses through this music, bringing to life its diversity and humanity through three vignettes: *The Great Lover*, *Lonely*

Town: Pas de Deux, and Times Square, 1944. The last of the three was the finale of the musical's first act.

The score calls for flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, three clarinets, two horns, three trumpets, three trombones; timpani and percussion including suspended cymbal, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, traps, wood block and xylophone; piano and strings.

Symphonic Suite from *The Red Pony*

Aaron Copland

Born 14 November, 1900 in Brooklyn, New York

Died 2 December, 1990 in Tarrytown, New York

Aaron Copland's most beloved music is associated with the ballet stage: *Appalachian Spring, Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid*. He also made a substantial contribution to the growing genre of film scores during an era when Hollywood was coming of age. His first cinematic foray was the music for Lewis Milestone's *Of Mice and Men* (1939), based on the Steinbeck novel. Close on its heels followed scores for *The City* (1939) and the movie adaptation of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1940). Copland pursued cinematic composition for several additional projects: *North Star* (1943), *Fiesta* (1947), *The Red Pony* and *The Heiress* (both 1949); the latter film, based on Henry James's novel (and the same source for the play currently on Broadway) won Copland an academy award. His film career concluded with the music for *Something Wild* (1961).

The Red Pony was a particularly felicitous project for Copland because it gave him the opportunity to collaborate again with Lewis Milestone, the producer/director of *Of Mice and Men*. Of that earlier project, Copland later observed:

Milestone sensed that there were scenes where music should take over to express the emotions of the characters, and others involved with the production wanted a composer who would not follow the formulae for movie music. Not even the music director got in my way. . . . I was an outsider to Hollywood, but I did not condescend to compose film music; I worked hard at it. Perhaps this is why I was accepted.

Composers in today's world rarely enjoy such luxury or empathy. Given such fortunate circumstances, he could hardly have helped but come up with a wonderful score.

The Red Pony is about Jody, a California ranch boy whose father gives him a pony. Capitalizing on the rural American scenario, Copland followed the same instincts that served him so well for his American ballets. The music is in his "folk-song" style, yet all of the themes are original, a fact of which he was very proud. If the music is not quite up to the stellar level of his ballets, it has the advantage of a bit more freshness to our ears because it is somewhat less familiar.

Copland adapted the Suite from *The Red Pony* the same year, when conductor Efrem Kurtz asked him for a piece to inaugurate Kurtz's first season as music director of the Houston Symphony. Its six movements basically track life on the ranch, colored by the imagination of a young boy. Noteworthy are the two parts of the third movement, "Dream March" and "Circus

Music." The latter, appropriately, uses only winds and percussion. Copland's "Happy Ending" reworks material from the opening "Morning on the Ranch," neatly tying together both plot and music.

Copland's score calls for two flutes (both alternating on piccolo), two oboes, English horn, four clarinets (including one bass clarinet and one in E-flat), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, celesta, harp and strings.

Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin

Born 26 September, 1898 in Brooklyn, New York

Died 11 July, 1937 in Beverly Hills, California

If tomorrow's newspaper were to announce a concert of American music, at which a committee of judges would decide what American music *is*, they would face a very lengthy evening, and the event would face skepticism, if not outright ridicule. Such a newspaper article actually ran in January 1924 in the *New York Tribune*, announcing that Irving Berlin, Victor Herbert and George Gershwin would introduce new compositions on the program. The paper reported:

George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto, Irving Berlin is writing a syncopated tone poem and Victor Herbert is working on an American Suite.

It was news to Gershwin. He had planned a collaboration with jazz band leader Paul Whiteman, whom he had met in 1922, but the details had not yet been determined.

The original jazz concerto?

Gershwin was 25, ambitious, talented and unschooled. Recognizing the commercial and professional potential of the American music event, he and Whiteman decided to make the new piece happen. They agreed on a free-form composition for Whiteman's band featuring solo piano. Gershwin sketched the score in a two-piano version that initially bore the title 'American Rhapsody;' by the time of the premiere on 12 February, 1924, it had acquired its present title. In a matter of weeks the piece was drafted. Only a few pre-existing ideas found their way into the Rhapsody, but one was seminal: the fabulous clarinet glissando that soars upward at the start, setting the whole sultry tone of the work, was already in Gershwin's sketchbooks.

Whiteman suggested that Ferde Grofé (1892-1972) orchestrate the Rhapsody. Today, Grofé's reputation rests primarily on his splendid and colorful *Grand Canyon Suite* (1931). In 1924, he was highly respected as a band composer and arranger, and he had already worked closely with Whiteman. Gershwin had no background in orchestration (although Victor Herbert

agreed to teach him shortly after this *Rhapsody* was completed). Grofé's accomplishment was masterly, and contributed greatly to *Rhapsody in Blue*'s success.

The long arm of influence: Gershwin's American classic

The work has had an extraordinary impact on the history of American music and culture. Although some critics objected to Gershwin's lack of traditional formal discipline, the audience loved the piece. Everyone -- even the most disdainful critics -- acknowledged the freshness of the musical ideas. *Rhapsody in Blue* positioned Gershwin as the great hope of American music.

Gershwin later told his first biographer, Isaac Goldberg:

I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness.

That description helps to explain the capriciousness and vivid snapshots in Gershwin's music. The *Rhapsody* consists of two large sections that are peppered with improvisatory solo piano cadenzas. Major rhythmic ideas dominate the first half, with extensive, non-traditional development. The slow E major section that contains the *Rhapsody's* most famous melody is the emotional heart of the work, but gives way to a showy and virtuosic close.

The traditional assessment of *Rhapsody in Blue* pegs it as popular music plunked squarely into the traditional concert hall, thereby imparting an unaccustomed aura of legitimacy to an American composer. For the entire balance of his tragically short life, Gershwin craved acceptance from the world of art music. Those who object to the meandering structure of this

piece overlook that a Rhapsody is, by definition, a free fantasy, often of epic character. On that level Gershwin succeeds brilliantly. His incomparable piano writing retains its spontaneity and panache 70 years after he improvised so much of it on opening night.

Ferde Grofé's original score was for Whiteman's jazz band. Two years later he did another scoring for full orchestra, calling for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, drums, solo piano, three saxophones, banjo and strings.

An American in Paris

George Gershwin

Vincente Minnelli's film *An American in Paris*, which starred Gene Kelly and introduced Leslie Caron, won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1951. Gershwin's music provided the basis for its vibrant soundtrack, including such time-honored classics as "Embraceable You," "By Strauss," "Someone to Watch Over Me," and "Our Love is Here to Stay."

The ballet toward the film's conclusion, danced by Kelly and Caron as a dream sequence, provides the film's excuse for the 18 minutes of uninterrupted music we know as *An American in Paris*. Gershwin's score captures the naïveté of the innocent abroad and the *joie de vivre* of the world's most romantic city, right down to the din of its traffic.

A chronological conundrum

Gershwin died in 1937. How then could he compose a film score for a movie that came out in 1951? In this case, the music came first. Gershwin travelled to Paris in 1928 in order to acquire more formal training in composition. He himself was thus the American of the title. Even though he was already a great popular success on New York's Broadway stage, he wished to develop a command of traditional, classical techniques. To that end, he sought out the French master Maurice Ravel for advice and lessons. Recognizing the originality of Gershwin's musical voice, Ravel declared that he could teach the young American nothing.

Jazz and taxi horns in the roaring twenties

An American in Paris, which dates from 1928, is a valentine of sorts. After returning to the States, Gershwin told an interviewer:

This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely . . . My purpose here is to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere.

Gershwin's music makes it easy to imagine the heady atmosphere of France in the roaring '20s. Blues and the Charleston were almost as popular in the French capital as they were in the States. In this spirited tone poem Paris comes alive, allowing us to experience with the composer the

curiosity of an eager tourist, the cacophony of honking taxicabs, and the surprisingly prevalent influence of American jazz.

Gershwin scored *An American in Paris* for 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba; alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones; snare drum, wood block, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, 2 tom toms, 4 auto horns, xylophone, glockenspiel, timpani, celesta and strings.

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