

Concert 1

September 23, 2017

Overture to *The Cowboys*--John Williams

While John Adams, Phillip Glass, John Corigliano, and a host of others vie for the mantle of successor to Aaron Copland, in point of fact, the average American has probably heard more music for symphonic orchestra by John Williams than all of the others put together. He stands alone in his position as the most successful and most admired film composer of the last thirty years or so. Over four-dozen Academy Award nominations (five won) and some twenty-two Grammy wins speak for themselves. His music is so ubiquitous that it is easy to forget just how much of it we know and experience. While there have been any number of film composers who have experimented in various styles of writing for films, it is he who is most responsible for the rebirth of the great symphonic film music style that had prevailed in Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s. Symphony orchestras perform his music on the concert stage simply because it was written for symphony orchestras—on Hollywood sound stages. His peripatetic musical talent is not confined to Hollywood, by any means, though. He spent the eighties as Arthur Fiedler's successor as conductor of the Boston Pops, and now guest conducts almost everywhere. Also active as a composer of concert music, he has written over a dozen concertos for solo instruments and orchestra, as well as several chamber music works.

He was classically trained as a pianist, having studied at the Juilliard School with the formidable Rosina Lhévinne, mentor to generations of top concert pianists. Subsequently, he soon joined the New York commercial scene as arranger, pianist, and composer before moving to Los Angeles. There he continued his career, making an early appearance as a composer with contributions to television series like "Gilligan's Island" and "Wagon Train" in the late 1950s. As his career developed, he began to write film scores by the dozens it seems--movies you know, but probably have forgotten about. You may remember: *Valley of the Dolls*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, and *The Towering Inferno*. Somewhat more recent films include: *War Horse* and *The Book Thief*. He is most renowned for the "Star Wars" films, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," and such, but his work has encompassed much more, including such compositions as the theme to the NBC nightly news. But there is no doubt that it is his association with the film directors George Lucas and Steven Spielberg--begun in the 1970s—that has produced his most notable scores.

His symphonic style owes much to the music of many great composers; Gustav Holst comes to mind—and he personally has singled out Edward Elgar. Other than a masterful technical prowess in orchestration, his success as a composer is surely a remarkable talent to imagine just the right music for an infinitude of human emotions—from the terror in the simple, two-note, shark motive in "Jaws" to the soaring spaceship music of "Star Wars." He scored almost every one of the "Harry Potter" films, and his adroit conjuration of the magic of those tales is just perfect in the minds of countless fans.

Oh, yes, remember Henry Mancini's sinister, low jazzy piano theme to "Peter Gunn?" That was the young Williams, himself, at the piano. That tells it all.

Cheyenne Rhapsody—Jeff Hickman

Jeff Hickman is familiar to folks in Cheyenne in an impressive number of ways. A long-time resident of the city, he grew up and attended public school here. He has been a mainstay of the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra for many years, notably serving as Steward, and as a member of the Artistic Advisory Committee. No rehearsal or concert would be complete without the supervisory eye of Jeff backstage. But, he has had an active life in other aspects of the Cheyenne arts scene, for he is a veteran member of the Capitol Choral group, and a frequent member of the casts of many performances of the Cheyenne Little Theater players—not to mention several seasons with the Old Fashioned Melodrama.

He majored in Chemistry/PreMed at the University of Wyoming, but along with his many and diverse occupations, he has always pursued a deep and abiding interest in music. Devoting much of his life to the study of musical scores from many eras, as well as attending concerts, and engaging in constant conversations with musicians about everything in their craft, he has gained an admirable, deep knowledge of the art—constantly building upon his early start playing the cornet and piano in Cheyenne.

Over the centuries composers have employed a dizzying number of techniques to create structure and form, establish atmosphere and a relation to the experienced world, and to provide technical challenges and points of departure. All of the above are inherent in Hickman's *Cheyenne Rhapsody*. The main theme, if you will, is based upon the vowels in the three words: Cheyenne, Laramie, and Wyoming. The extracted letters used as names of musical notes, C, H (German for B), E, E, A, A, E, and G collectively form the motto upon which the entire work is based. It's an old technique, dating back to the 16th century, and called *soggetto cavato*—or “carved” syllables. Themes are literally carved out of letters in words—whether a patron's name, an adage, or a location, for example. The theme heard in the opening fanfare of the *Rhapsody* is “carved” out of Cheyenne-Laramie-Wyoming.

The *Rhapsody* falls into two large sections, each with nine short sections that are inspired by a most varied plethora of sources: events in local history; major musical works by composers such as Bach, Handel, Beethoven and Verdi; other works by the composer, himself; Morse Code; the name of contemporary, eminent musical performers; the railroad; and more. An Aaron Copland ballet, the TV theme from “Branded,” and themes “carved” from Copland's name, as well. You may hear snatches of ideas that sound like Cole Porter and Gershwin, too. Fugues are implied, as well as marches and Latin styles. There's literally something for everyone, here, all quickly flowing from one distinct idea, style, and inspiration after the other—and all the product of the musical imagination and technical knowledge of one who has lived his life in Cheyenne and finds music in it all.

Cheyenne Rhapsody was commissioned by the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra, and tonight's performance is the world première. It is dedicated to Shirley Elaine Flynn and William Dubois.

Rhapsody in Blue—George Gershwin

George Gershwin was arguably the most successful and talented of America's composers of popular music. His songs constitute the core of the "American Songbook," whether composed as part of his immensely successful Broadway shows, or as stand alone popular tunes. Born of Russian Jewish immigrants, he didn't evince his formidable musical talents until about the age of ten, when a piano was purchased for his older brother and later collaborator, Ira. Much to the latter's relief, George soon commandeered the piano, and the rest is, as they say, history. His audiences rewarded him substantially—he is estimated to have become the wealthiest composer in modern times. He earned over a quarter of a million dollars for *Rhapsody in Blue* during the first decade of its life, and it still is bringing in the bucks, as witnessed by every commercial for United Airlines.

Rhapsody in Blue was written in great haste for a 1924 concert in New York's Aeolian Hall given by Denver's own Paul Whiteman (his father, Wilberforce, was a legend in Colorado music education), billed as "An Experiment in Modern Music." Notwithstanding the description, you wouldn't have heard Stravinsky or Schoenberg that night, rather Irving Berlin, Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern, and others of that ilk. However, Jascha Heifetz, Sergei Rachmaninov, and other luminaries of music were in the audience. The poster read that Whiteman would be "assisted by Zez Confrey and George Gershwin"—notice that the composer of "Kitten on the Keys" and "Dizzy Fingers" received top billing to the young Gershwin. Gershwin had been asked late in 1923 to write a piece for the Whiteman orchestra, but he had turned his attention to more pressing matters, and was horrified to read in the *New York Tribune* on the 4th of January, 1924 that he was to première a "jazz concerto" on February 12. Gershwin plunged in and presented his brilliant succession of "American" themes to Ferde Grofe, Whiteman's orchestrator, to arrange for large jazz band and piano (the symphonic version came later)—Gershwin didn't have the skill to do that at this point in his career.

The composition opened the second half of the concert, with Gershwin as soloist—using no music, and probably considerably "enhancing" the solo part. The opening clarinet glissando evocative of traditional Jewish klezmer music kicked it off, and the now-familiar tunes came rushing by. While *Rhapsody in Blue* really is not "jazz," and certainly not a concerto in the traditional sense, Gershwin turned out a masterpiece that is a model of what came to be called "symphonic jazz."

What is helpful in appreciating the work is the importance of so-called "serious" or "classical" musical interests and training in Gershwin's life that is quite unprecedented for someone who enjoyed his kind of success. He certainly was not some sort of untutored musical genius who later sought "legitimacy" after having proven himself in the popular world. Rather, early on, as a young boy he studied and performed under traditional piano teachers the music of composers such as Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy. Later, he journeyed to Paris to study under the famed teacher of composition, Nadia Boulanger, as well as Maurice Ravel. However, both declined to teach him, more or less afraid to compromise the genius evident in his burgeoning success. While in Paris he met and admired the music of eminent composers such as Prokofiev, Poulenc, and Milhaud. Gershwin's ambitions were such, that long after he had achieved the kind of success that any popular composer would have envied, he assiduously studied formal composition

with established teachers. And he was successful. His *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Concerto in F, *An American in Paris*, and *Porgy and Bess* are masterpieces of his unique bridging of the so-called gap between popular art and “high” art.

American Symphonette No. 2--Morton Gould

While Leonard Bernstein is often seen as the multifaceted American musician who wore just about every musical hat—the garland probably most justifiable belongs to Morton Gould. What didn’t he do—and stunningly successfully? He was literally a household name during the nineteen forties and fifties, and was an active composer into his eighties. A child prodigy, he composed from a remarkably early age. By his late teenage years he was playing professionally in movie theatres and vaudeville, but got his big break as the staff pianist in 1932 for the newly opened Radio City Music Hall. Positions as conductor and arranger on national radio shows soon followed, as well as commissions for music for Broadway shows, film, ballets, and ultimately, television. His purview was certainly not limited to “popular” music, for he conducted many of the great symphony orchestras all over the world, often appearing as piano soloist, as well--*Rhapsody in Blue* was a specialty. Compositions flowed from his pen by the dozens with ridiculous ease, and a remarkable number of almost every ilk ensued. Pieces for American bands, symphony orchestras, chorus, concertos—including one for “rapper” and orchestra. The variety of styles and genres is simply astonishing.

He could plumb the depths of American popular culture, as well the aspirations of “higher, classical” art with an almost effortless equal facility—what is perhaps most impressive was his mastery of both approaches to musical composition. While both Bernstein and Gershwin were undeniable musical geniuses, it must be admitted that they struggled somewhat to find a facile musical voice that poured easily into the forms and structures of more formal musical composition—not so with Gould. He spoke as easily and with equal, natural facility in a “symphony” as he did in a piece for singing fire department.

The series of “symphonettes” for orchestra are cases in point. Composed at various times during the nineteen thirties and early nineteen forties, they are charming short essays in the symphony genre, and are completely smooth idiomatic explorations of its “classical” norms. The title is a bit whimsical, the composer alluding to the vogue of the time to tack on “-ette” to almost anything: dinette, kitchenette and even Buick and Cadillac “sedanettes.” Like so many “cross-over” compositions of the time, this little “symphonette” (composed for a 1938 radio show) is infused with jazz-like elements in each of its three movements. The first is appropriately in a kind of sonata form, and the second is a traditional dance form, in this case a rather sedate *pavan*, one of Gould’s most famous tunes. The muted trumpet and “walking” bassoon accompaniment are instantly recognizable from myriad performances. The last movement, in the best symphonic tradition is a scampering affair that the composer admits is a “slight takeoff on the Prelude from Bach’s E-major unaccompanied Violin Partita.” That may be, but essentially it is an adroit example of late 1930s through early 1950s of happy, urban, East Coast, jazzy soundscapes so familiar from, say, *West Side Story* and a thousand movies.

Suite from *Our Town*—Aaron Copland

Aaron Copland is a man who is hard to pin down. Clearly America's most well-known and respected "classical" composer, he was the creator of some of the country's most beloved compositions that brought the "American" style to the concert hall. Yet, for all that, he was a musician with a remarkably broad range of personal interests and musical styles. His deep intellect and discerning tastes probed and were influenced by about all of the important composers and approaches to composition of the twentieth century. He spent time in his early maturity in France, where he immersed himself in the European musical avant-garde; he was interested in and was influenced by jazz; he maintained a life-long interest in the music of Latin America; he participated fully in the burgeoning interest on the part of the arts community in American folk elements and nationalism during the 1930s and 40s; and later in his life explored the dissonant musical idioms of the European avant-garde, yet again. But, he was not an artistic chameleon, rather a man who saw vitality, authenticity, and artistic possibilities in most of what his probing mind and "big" ears encountered.

During the Great Depression difficult economic conditions, as well as other political and social factors, led American artists to ally themselves with public intellectuals in a variety of sectors in celebrating and promulgating the American common experience. It was perhaps the dominating artistic paradigm of the times, and even today remnants may be seen in such unexpected places as Post Office lobbies, where the WPA commissioned murals on populist themes. Copland's compositions from this time—the ballet, *Billy the Kid* (1939; *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942); and *A Lincoln Portrait* (1942)—all are signature works of the man and the era.

Like other "serious" composers of the late 1930s, Copland responded to the opportunities that lay in greater exposure by writing for Hollywood films. However, unlike some, his approach lay not in lush neo-Romantic scores that provided musical accompaniment "tit for tat," attempting to portray everything on the screen. Rather, he conceived of a general mood appropriate to the dramatic content, and in a rather spare manner, blended it into the whole. And it must be said, the reflective, universalist nature of much of his inherent musical style of the time was perfect for the 1940 film setting of Thornton Wilder's 1938 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Our Town*.

Those who have seen the play, and there are many, know that it is a melancholy affair. It is about the ubiquity of everyday life, of small town folks, with predictable joys and tragedies, and the inevitable conclusion to our lives. It is the simple truth of the "most universal lament of them all: that we, our loved ones, everything living, dies." It is not a play of action, but one of reflection—no zippy tunes here, but an atmospheric musical underpinning to the quiet drama of every life, stripped of the quotidian diversions necessary for sanity. Copland was nominated for an Academy Award for his score to the film, and justly so. Its eloquence is a perfect evocation of the timeless cycle of death and rebirth of all living things. It reflects the truth in the play of the Stage Manager's response to Emily's query if anyone truly understands the value of life while they live it: "No. The saints and poets, maybe—they do some."

Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo*—Copland

In the same fecund year as *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *A Lincoln Portrait* came the ballet, *Rodeo*. The American choreographer, Agnes de Mille, was commissioned in that year by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (then in the US) for a ballet on cowboy themes of the American west. She responded with an apparently simple story: Awkward Cowgirl strives for the affections of the Head Wrangler, who is more interested in the winsome and feminine Rancher's Daughter. She tries to be a "real cowboy" by competing with the men on their own grounds, but only attracts the attention of the Champion Roper. Finally, she wins the day with the Head Wrangler by revealing her femininity and donning a dress for the Hoedown.

The first movement—"Buckaroo Holiday"—begins energetically, followed by subdued music for the cowgirl. Real galloping rodeo music ensues, followed shortly by the big entrance of the boisterous cowboys, accompanied by the traditional "Sis Joe" railroad tune. "If He'd be a Buckaroo" figures prominently, along with "Sis Joe," as the movement develops. The second movement is quiet reflection by the cowgirl, entitled "Corral Nocturne," in which she considers her frustration at failing to impress the men, and her love interest, specifically. Gentle woodwind solos accompany her contemplation of awkwardness. "Saturday Night Waltz" brings all the principals together in a social showdown to the tune of "I Ride an Old Paint." The Cowgirl loses the affection wars to the Rancher's Daughter and is left with the Champion Roper. Finally, the exuberant and familiar last movement—"Hoedown"—comes, opening with a literal quotation by Copland of the fiddle tune, "Bonaparte's Retreat," made famous by the Kentucky fiddler, William Stepp, in a 1937 Library of Congress recording. Other traditional songs heard are "McLeod's Reel" and "Gilderoy," as the Cowgirl finally wins her man, the Head Wrangler, at the big dance.