



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 1 – Stunning Strings

October 17, 2020

Five Folksongs in Counterpoint—Florence B. Price

Florence Price, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, was a pioneer black American composer who distinguished herself early on. Most notably, she is remembered as the first black American woman to garner success as a composer of symphonic music. Her first symphony is perhaps her best-known work. Winner of a national prize, it was given its première in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—a social and cultural milestone in this country at that time.

At a young age she journeyed north to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory, and returned to Arkansas and Georgia to teach at various small black colleges. After marriage she and her husband left a racially troubled Arkansas in 1927 for Chicago and her further study at the American Conservatory of Music. Her career blossomed, and recognition for her art led to the afore-mentioned symphony in 1931, followed by two more symphonies, concertos, and other works for orchestra. She composed in a variety of other genres: chamber works, piano music, and vocal compositions—over three hundred in all! Her songs and arrangements of spirituals were perhaps her most performed compositions. But, sadly, little of her *œuvre* has been published; with her increasing popularity today, that very well may change.

She apparently wrote two compositions for string quartet, both dated around 1950, although she may have begun one of them much earlier. They had similar titles—and underwent somewhat confusing title changes, as well—and both featured folksongs. Our concert features the quartet originally entitled “Negro Folksongs in Counterpoint;” after the addition of two broadly American folksongs to the original three, she changed the title to simply “Five Folksongs in Counterpoint.”

Thus, the five are: “Calvary,” “My Darling Clementine,” “Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes,” “Shortnin’ Bread,” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” These movements are manifestly not the usual simplistic arrangements of folksongs one often encounters. Anyone capable of the composition of sophisticated symphonies can and will do much more. Accordingly, they—notwithstanding the recognizable use of folk material—are miniature essays in contrapuntal treatment. One will hear a variety of accompanying motives and countermotives, usually in a non-imitative texture. Price was well educated in traditional European classical compositional styles and techniques, and her sophistication shows eloquently here. Yet, she is concomitantly, proudly and solidly rooted in her cultural roots. Recipient of early recognition, and then relative obscurity, her music is now enjoying a renaissance.

Dances sacrée et profane—Claude Debussy

While others, notably Franz Liszt, were on the forefront of stylistic change during the nineteenth century, it is surely Claude Debussy who forever established entirely new ways of thinking about the fundamental ways of defining and composing music in Western culture. More than anyone, he truly was the father of much of the philosophical basis for the complete turnover in musical art that defined the twentieth century. And, along the way, he composed some of the most original, creative, and dare we say, beautiful music in the repertoire. His name, of course, is indelibly linked with what is popularly called “musical impressionism,” but that doesn’t really specifically tell you much. What you may say is that he largely worked within a musical style that made little use of so many of the characteristics of a musical tradition that really dominated the concert halls of the 18th and 19th centuries. Most of us are familiar with concepts such as sonata form; development; key relationships; major and minor tonalities, with their respective scales, counterpoint, fugues, and especially “developing” musical ideas in an ongoing linear fashion. As dominant as these procedures were, Debussy saw other ways of creating and working with musical ideas. His specifically French way of looking at things was quite a contrast to the ideas and methods of the German-speaking composers (all names we know so well!) that had dominated concert halls for a couple of centuries. There was opera, to be sure, and Italians had always held sway there, but in abstract music (no words) the Germans were generally king. Along comes Debussy with a refreshing alternative aesthetic.

In a nutshell, Debussy was not much interested in systems of musical composition, wherein each part—large or small—had a rational, expected, and traditional relationships to every other part. Rather, he focused upon listening to musical sounds in new ways—considering them just for their intrinsic sound, and not how they might fit into a hierarchy as a mere building block. He opened up new ways of composing and listening, and the musical world was changed forever.

In keeping with Debussy’s orientation as a composer, he really never wrote any solo concertos (or symphonies, for that matter) in the traditional sense. But of course, he was a master of the orchestra, and did leave us with a half dozen works that may be designated “concertante,” that is, for orchestra and featuring a solo instrument. The *Première Rhapsodie* for orchestra and clarinet may be familiar. *Dances sacrée et profane* with harp soloist is an important example, as well.

Over the centuries occasionally works come about from a desire to showcase an innovative or new instrument—certainly, Haydn’s trumpet concerto, written for the new, keyed trumpet comes to mind. And, as is often the case, deficiencies in the new design may ultimately consign the “innovations” to the dustbin of musical history. And so it is with the new kind of harp for which Debussy wrote the *Dances*. The harp—traditionally, associated with France than any other country—had been a diatonic (incapable of playing the sharps and flats) instrument. Thus, its practical employment in the orchestra did pose challenges. Which is why, among several reasons, that one doesn’t hear much use of the harp in orchestras of the eighteenth century. But, the advent of the double action pedal—or concert—harp in the early nineteenth century facilitated its accelerated employment. However, the increase in

chromaticism in music of the late nineteen century led to the introduction in France of the “cross-strung,” or chromatic double harp to facilitate ease of playing all chromatic passages. It was a mixed success. The double row of strings poses additional challenges of its own, and though the design still is used in some cases, the traditional pedal harp is now predominant. Debussy, himself, indicated that the *Dances sacrée et profane* could be played on either kind of harp, or even on the piano.

Composed in 1904, the two dances are in contrasting styles—the “sacred” dance is couched in somber melodies that evoke ecclesiastical chant, while the “*profane*” (in French meaning simply secular, not anything blasphemous) evokes the gentle sway of a rather droll secular dance, perhaps a waltz. Throughout, one hears many of Debussy’s signature musical characteristics: modal melodies, parallel harmonies, non-functional harmonies (think of harmonies that don’t drive to cadence, but just “sound pleasant”), and of course, his marvelous mastery of orchestra color in the best French tradition. A subtlety that may be missed if you’re not a harpist are the many passages chockfull of chromaticism. Easy in many instrumental contexts, but a kind of *tour de force* for harpists! Debussy makes it all seem so facile.

Lyric for Strings—George T. Walker

An iconic figure among black American composers who worked in the classical field, Walker excelled marvelously in difficult times for men such as he. He was a native of Washington, DC, the son of a Jamaican immigrant. The first African-American composer to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music, he was educated at some of the most prestigious American schools: Oberlin, Eastman, Curtis, and the American Conservatory, Fontainebleau. Winner of Fulbright, Guggenheim, MacDowell, Whitney, and Rockefeller fellowships, he received commissions from outstanding orchestras, including the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic. An accomplished pianist, he gave his debut recital at New York’s Town Hall, and performed Rachmaninoff’s 3rd Piano Concerto with the Philadelphia Orchestra two weeks later—an auspicious beginning of a performing career. Later, he toured Europe extensively. After receiving the first doctorate given to an African-American from the Eastman school, he taught at several universities, including the University of Colorado at Boulder. Honored, respected, and admired, he lived a long life, dying in 2018 at the age of ninety-six.

His *œuvre* includes over ninety compositions in most of the standard genres, but like some other composers, his very first effort was a smashing success. The String Quartet no. 1 (1946) achieved immediate recognition, and remained one of the most-performed works by a black composer. Its musical nature and subsequent history bears somewhat of a similarity to Samuel Barber’s evergreen *Adagio for Strings* (1936) in that both works were composed by young composers, sons of physicians in well-educated families; were originally the second (slow) movements in their respective first string quartets; and both works were recognized early on as wonderfully suited to performance by a full string orchestra. In the latter version, Walker later named his movement *Lyric for Strings*.

The grief imbued in this work is not only in the mind of the listener, for Walker composed it with his deep feelings for his grandmother, who had passed

away the previous year. He entitled the work first, *Lament*, before changing the title. While as a typical young post-war composer, he naturally explored a variety of musical styles, include the *avant-garde* fads of the time, he remained primarily a neo-romantic—like his fellow Curtis graduate, Barber. And like Barber’s famous *Adagio*, Walker’s work is characterized by long spun out melodic lines that weave in and out with emotional sinuousness. But, having observed that, it is pellucidly clear that this marvelous composition is completely George Walker’s.

Holberg Suite, op. 40—Edvard Grieg

Edvard Grieg was the most significant Scandinavian composer during the years leading up to the beginning of the twentieth century. He was a prolific composer of songs and music for the piano—small lyric compositions being his obvious forte. In addition to his songs, he wrote a large number of choral works, many for unaccompanied male voices, and some of them remain evergreen favorites. While he did compose in other genres, achieving notable success with his only piano concerto and his string quartet, they were exceptional. He was educated at the Leipzig conservatory, where his early models were Schubert and Schumann, and he spent much time in Copenhagen. Like his fellow Norwegians of that generation, he was oriented to Denmark, the Danish language, and Danish culture in general. Later, in his early twenties, under the influence of the great Norwegian violinist, Ole Bull, he developed an affinity for Norwegian peasant culture. That effected a major change in his musical outlook, and for the rest of his life he plumbbed the depths of Norwegian folk music and literature. It became a major part of his musical style and placed him firmly in the ranks of the nationalist composers so characteristic of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Even when not directly quoting folk materials, the harmonies, rhythms, and melodic nuances of that tradition deeply inform his musical style. His milieu was the breathtaking beauty of Norway’s fjords, lakes, mountains, and forests.

With regard to his orchestral music, only his piano concerto, incidental music for *Peer Gynt*, the *Symphonic Dances*, the *Norwegian Dances* and the *Holberg Suite* have remained durable concert favorites. The *Holberg Suite* was written in 1884 as part of the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the great Danish-Norwegian writer Ludvig Holberg. Subtitled “Suite in Olden Style,” it is simply a suite of eighteenth-century dances newly-composed by Grieg to evoke the “time of Holberg.” He wrote the suite originally for solo piano, and arranged it for string orchestra the next year.

It opens with an introductory busy, bustling *Praeludium*, followed by a *Sarabande*. The latter dance is of Spanish origin, a slow and somber dance in three. The *Gavotte* that follows perfectly illustrates the necessity for the rhythms to exactly support the dancers’ steps. Accordingly, a gavotte is a dance in two beats, wherein the heavy accent on beat two occurs with the dancers’ leap and landing—in this case, Grieg makes it easily heard.

A little *musette* provides some diversion in the middle of the *Gavotte*—identified by the allusion to bagpipe drones in the open fifths in the bass. An “air” was often the slow movement in Baroque dance suites (as in the so-called “Air on the G-string” from Bach’s famous second orchestral suite) and Grieg provides an

extensive, suitably doleful one, here. The *Rigaudon* that ends the suite is a bright, bubbling affair, interrupted by a brief lyrical diversion in the middle.

The *Holberg Suite*, strictly an exercise in eighteenth-century style, nevertheless, ventures into mildly romantic harmony. Grieg wisely and skillfully fused the two styles into what a later generation might have deemed neo-classicism, and created a thoroughly attractive little diversion.

--Wm. E. Runyan
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