



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 3 – A Time to Inspire

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***lubilo* — Brian Raphael Nabors**

Nabors is a busy young man. And justly so. His appealing music is garnering a flurry of performances around the country, including those by some of the august orchestras at the top tier of classical music. So much so, that his website has announced that he is no longer accepting commissions until he catches up with his work! A native of Birmingham, Alabama, he attended Samford University there, and later went on to graduate studies at the Cincinnati Conservatory, ultimately earning a doctorate in composition there. He writes articulately about his concept of the process of musical composition, and its relationship to the unique nature of every artist. His wry description of his own musical voice—based upon his broad and varied young life is “Americanized Russian-French Bartókian Gospel Jazz.” In addition to venerable composers such as Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Bartók, he cites his admiration for more recent luminaries as Christopher Rouse, George Crumb, and John Corigliano. He further alludes to his early attraction to French music of the early twentieth century, especially the “contemplative” sort. Well, that’s a lot for the listener to digest and identify—but, as is usually the case with thoughtful artists, stylistic influences are subtle and more useful concepts to them than to us. What we will hear in his work is music that is infused with traditional elements, but which is thoroughly founded in contemporary techniques. Challenging but more than accessible to lay audiences in a winning combination.

lubilo is a brief work, lasting only a couple of minutes, but jubilant it manifestly is, and a perfect opener for a concert. It was commissioned by the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra to celebrate its fifteenth season, and given its world première by them in 2019. Based in Houston, Texas, this renowned professional group has an enviable record of commissioning over one hundred compositions by outstanding composers.

When one thinks of happy, rousing music that sets an uplifting mood for an evening of music, composers over the years have employed any number of gestures to invoke an upbeat atmosphere—old friends that have become familiar musical tropes. In *lubilo* Nabors has woven together a raft of these into a scintillating *mélange*. There’s little here that pays attention to standard musical niceties such as form, main theme, second theme, development, and the like. Rather, the tight musical weft just rips along in a surging tide of “jubilant” ideas, one after the other, painting an epigrammatic evocation of the celebratory mood.

***Le Sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)* — Igor Stravinsky**

It's somewhat fun to look back at the styles and fashions that shocked our ancestors, smugly reveling in our own sophistication and advanced thinking. Yet, it must be said that almost a century on, the musical impact of Stravinsky's epochal ballet, *Le Sacre du printemps*, still has the power, if not to shock, at least to affect audiences in powerful ways. It is the third and final ballet from Stravinsky's early musical maturity—the others being *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrushka* (1911)—all three were commissioned by Sergey Diaghilev for his famous Ballets Russes. The latter was the most influential dance company in the world, the cream of Russia's dance community, and which was active for decades in Europe, most notably in Paris and Monte Carlo. Under the artistic leadership of Diaghilev, this company was the cutting edge, so to speak, of contemporary dance, and responsible for the creation of artistic works whose influence continues unabated today.

Diaghilev's genius for innovation naturally led him to the young Stravinsky, who had been a protégé of the famous Rimsky-Korsakov, master teacher, composer of operas, and one of the most adroit orchestrators in musical history. The latter is key to understanding much of the musical style of Stravinsky's three ballets, for Rimsky-Korsakov's sparkling evocation of Russian picturesque images through challenging and imaginative scoring for the orchestra leads directly from the older composer to his student. Stravinsky's first two ballets for the company were "smash" hits, and so naturally Diaghilev was receptive to Stravinsky's ideas for a ballet that was based upon what archaeologist and folklorist, Nikolai Roerich, thought to be authentic fertility rites of ancient Russia. A so-called "primitivism" was of interest to artists in many fields as the Post-Romantic era ground to a close, in preparation for the Modernism of the twentieth century. It should therefore not be surprising that an enterprising young composer with the ambition and imagination of Stravinsky should create a musical style unlike anything heard before in the ballet pits of France.

What the audience heard that night in May 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris was a triumph of daring musical innovation—a masterpiece of rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic originality. And it was not always pretty. The rhythms were thumping, insistent, and not common, at all. Unexpected accents, irregular and constantly changing meters, and displaced accents gave a kind of rhythmic "vertigo" to Parisian ballet audiences used to refined, predictable, and elegant dances from centuries of tradition. The melodies did not partake of the traditional scales that had formed the melodies of European music, and were played in unusual ways by the instruments—ultra high, or in odd combinations, for example. The same could be said for Stravinsky's new, daring harmonies—including the use of dissonance apparently for its own sake. In other words, for its very appropriate primitivism. Both dancers and musicians found the score almost beyond their powers of execution—it still is a technical challenge to today's highly trained artists.

Well, Parisians are passionate about their art, and they had an immediate reaction to the music, as well as the "sexually suggestive" and "crude" choreography. The riot at the première is now legendary: catcalls, whistles, fistfights in the aisles, with order barely restored by the arrival of police. It must be said, that in today's somewhat staid concert world, it's rather nice to reflect

about an audience that simply cared that much about high art. Well, it was a ground-breaking night, and many of the fundamental concepts of concert music were never the same thereafter. But it is important to also observe that most composers did not go on to compose works in the style of *Le Sacre du printemps*, including Stravinsky, himself. But, the innovations wrought by him were part of a vanguard of musical change that was reflected in the transformations in all of art after the cataclysm of social change that was World War I.

The ballet consists of fourteen numbers, or dances, divided into two parts, the first part centering around various aspects of the annual life of the tribe, and the second focusing on rituals leading up to the human sacrifice of “The Chosen One.” Noteworthy events to listen for include the famous (very high and tricky) bassoon solo at the very opening; the irregular (and famous) accents in the following dance, “The Dance of the Adolescents;” the unusual woodwind combinations in the “Round Dance;” the general barbarism and virtuosity required of the orchestra in the “Dance of the Earth;” the dense, ghost-like harmonies of the introduction to the second part; and the alternation between steady, almost monotonous rhythms and the confusing meter changes that occur in the “Glorification of the Chosen One.” The last movement, “Sacrificial Dance,” is in many ways a recap of all of these marvelous sounds, and reminds us of why some historians—with only small exaggeration—posit the beginning of twentieth-century music in this stunning ballet.

Today, when one visits the serene island cemetery, San Michele, in Venice, where both Diaghilev and Stravinsky are buried, only a few yards from each other, it is far in time and distance from the youth of these two masters in Russia. I have always found it deeply poignant to see the faded ballet slippers and spent votive candles left on their modest markers by generations of dancers and musicians who have made the pilgrimage in homage.

Concertino for Flute and Orchestra in D Major, op. 107 — Cécile Chaminade

Today, Cécile Chaminade’s flute concertino is a *de rigueur* composition for flautists everywhere, and generations of young pianists have played her little piano piece, *Scarf Dance*. Unfortunately, time is often cruel to artists, and many fine composers are remembered—if at all—for only one or two compositions. And so it is with Chaminade. Ironically, almost all of her some 400 compositions were published in her time, and her popularity, widespread in her native France, was sufficient in this country to account for the establishment of numerous “Chaminade Clubs” around 1900. She was awarded the Légion d’Honneur and other prestigious honors, so she certainly did not labor in obscurity. By her mid-thirties she began to focus her compositional efforts in the smaller genres, notably lyrical character pieces for piano solo and songs—that for which she is most known today. However, earlier in her career she composed a series of works for large ensembles, including several orchestral works and an *opera comique*. The last of these, her evergreen Concertino for solo flute stems from 1902.

It was commissioned by the Paris Conservatoire and its esteemed virtuoso and professor of flute, Paul Taffanel. It reasonably could have also been

intended as an examination piece for the Conservatoire's students of flute. Originally written for flute and piano accompaniment, only later did she arrange it for flute and orchestra. Her orchestra employs a rather full instrumentation to accompany the relatively light voice of the flute, eschewing trumpets, but including three trombones, tuba, and timpani, by example. As a concertino ("little concerto"), not a concerto, the form is telescoped into single movement, not the usual three. Moreover, Chaminade's work is straightforward and simple in form: three successive contrasting sections, followed by a repeat of the first. A piece such as this, in that time and place, and for this instrument, would not be complete without a formidable cadenza, and we certainly hear a dazzling one, just before the return of the winsome and memorable opening theme at the end.

Chaminade's Concertino is a delightful example of her quintessential style, with elegance, rich melodious inventiveness, and limpid textures. All of the traditional (perhaps clichéd) tenants of Gallic art! She lived on until 1944, but by then the world and its musical tastes had changed seismically. Knowledge and appreciation of her *oeuvre* is sparse now, but the Concertino and many of her short works for solo piano are revered by those in the know.

Symphony No. 1 ("Afro-American Symphony") — William Grant Still

Still was a pioneer for African-Americans in "classical" music composition; he was the first American Black man in practically everything having to do with conducting and composing for symphony orchestras and opera companies. The scion of a distinguished family, he was a descendent of the famous nineteenth-century abolitionist, William Still. While more fortunate members of the family bought their freedom or escaped north, his immediate family was left behind in slavery in the southernmost isolated county in Mississippi (south of Natchez). He was born in Woodville, Mississippi in 1895 to a remarkable woman, who took him out of that agrarian obscurity to Little Rock, Arkansas, where she went on to teach high school for many decades. She and his stepfather gave him great encouragement and created an artistic home environment in what were obviously difficult times for folks with their aspirations. With encouragement and apparently great ambition, he learned the violin, cello, and oboe, and at an early age attended Wilberforce University in Ohio with the goal of becoming a composer—especially for the symphony and opera. Soon thereafter he enrolled in Oberlin College, and after military service in WWI, he accepted a position with W.C. Handy (composer of *The Saint Louis Blues*) in New York City.

His career there blossomed—while not achieving fame as a composer right away, he nevertheless worked at the highest levels of New York musical circles as an arranger. Radio and musical theatre became his *métier*, and a veritable Who's Who of musical luminaries became his associates: Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw, Sophie Tucker, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake—the list is impressive and long. Along the way he studied musical composition, most notably with the important early twentieth-century composer, Edgar Varèse. Soon a flood of works ensued, and his music ultimately was performed by groups such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the BBC Orchestra, to just name a few. He left New York in the mid-1930s for Los Angeles, where he spent the rest of his life, and began another successful career

arranging and composing for the film and television industry, but focusing on “serious” composition. From then on, a torrent of works ensued: operas, ballets, symphonic poems, orchestral suites, choral music, songs, and five symphonies.

His first symphony, subtitled “Afro-American,” was composed in 1930 and was the first symphony composed by a Black man and performed by a major American orchestra (in this case, the Rochester Philharmonic). Notwithstanding his study with Varèse, and the significant influence of the famously *avant-garde* composer upon him, the symphony is a rather conservative work, cast in a tonal, accessible idiom. He indicated that his intent was to reflect untutored musical characteristics of Black “sons of the soil,” hence the blues and spiritual (but not jazz) elements that thoroughly inform the work. Each of the four movements is associated with excerpts from poems by the important Black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, cast in dialect. These inform the moods of each of the movements, and respectively are entitled, “Twell de Night Is Pas,” “W’en I Gits Home,” “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,” and “Ode to Ethiopia.”

The first movement contains strong allusions to the well-known twelve-bar blues structure, while the second is infused with intimations of Black spirituals, reflecting the metaphor of “going home” for death as an escape from the realities of difficult times. The third movement is animated (as most third movements are in a symphony), and in this case admirably reflects a sermon about “An’ we’ll shout ouah halleluyahs, On dat mighty reck’nin’ day.” Finally, the last movement is a noble and dignified evocation of the text: “Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul...”

--Wm. E. Runyan
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