

***Grand Canyon Suite*—Ferde Grofé**

Ferde Grofé takes a rightful place in the company of the Gershwin work, for it was he who orchestrated the latter's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Grofé was Paul Whiteman's staff arranger, and without his experience and craftsmanship, there is no small doubt that Gershwin's masterpiece would have been ready in time, or even have achieved the *succès fou* that it did. He created so much of the "sound" that we associate with Gershwin's composition, and in 1942 went on to create the arrangement for full symphonic orchestra that everybody knows today. But, of course, Grofé was an accomplished composer in his own right, and *Grand Canyon Suite* is the work by which he is remembered today.

An indefatigable notable in the American popular music scene for decades, he was born in New York City to a distinguished classical music family, but received his early music education in Germany, and by 1920 was playing piano for Whiteman's orchestra. He went on to arrange and compose myriad works, was on the radio, conducted in Carnegie Hall, worked on Broadway, was a film composer in Hollywood, and even taught at the Juilliard School of Music. His interests lay everywhere, and his serious compositions reflect this, especially his penchant for composing orchestral suites that are heavily descriptive: *Mississippi Suite*, *Kentucky Derby Suite*, *Aviation Suite*, *Death Valley Suite*, *World's Fair Suite*, and *Rudy Vallee Suite*, to name just a very few. And let's not forget his Sonata for Flute and Bicycle Pump.

But, still, *Grand Canyon Suite* is the survivor, and rightly so. It is a masterpiece of pictorialism and orchestration. Finished in 1931, the suite depicts various scenes as may occur in the canyon. The first movement, "Sunrise," is a gentle, ever-growing depiction of the sun's creeping rays, carried by constantly ascending scale passages. There are no real memorable tunes here, just atmospheric, swelling harmonies—quite a contrast to Richard Strauss's bombastic sunrise from the beginning of *Also sprach Zarathustra!* "Painted Desert" also largely avoids singable melodies; rather, it evokes the static beauty of the quiet desert by constant, repetitive soft woodwind clusters and shimmering percussive effects that revolve slowly like a reflective prism. The introspective English horn finally ends it all, with a little help from a solo clarinet. Who hasn't heard "On the Trail," with its clip-clopping donkey hooves? Long ago, it became ubiquitous from its use by the Philip Morris radio and TV shows. And unmistakable is the opening "hee-haw"—and many more throughout the movement—from our long-eared friends. It's a placid, quintessential Western atmosphere, and with a real, memorable melody, to boot!

Horns and chimes announce "retreat," the end of day and the advent of "Sunset." In an inversion of the ascending scales of "Sunrise," gentle descending scales, accompanied by lush scoring in the best Hollywood tradition, gradually settle into dusk, with a final muted call in the brass. "Cloudburst" opens with a grandiose, romantic scene setter, but soon little furtive drops of rain begin to fall, distant thunder and lightning draw nearer, and a full-fledged Western gully-washer is in full roar. You don't need a Walt Disney film to help your imagination in this totally masterful evocation. Then, of course, it all dies away almost as soon as it came, and Grofé tops the suite off with a "grand" peroration led by a recounting of the "On the Trail" theme, majestically intoned by the brass.