

## Concert 2

October 27, 2018

### Wyoming: A Tone Poem—Bob Mathews

Bob Mathews is the well-known, recently retired, long-time director of the orchestra at Cheyenne's East High School and Carey Junior High School. Under his leadership the orchestra has flourished, and has traveled and performed out of the state. An aficionado of fiddle music, he leads a small group that features the art, and is a distinguished prize-winning fiddler, himself. He won the Wyoming All-State Old-Time fiddle championship five times, and the "Fanciest Fiddling" prize at the National Old-Time Contest twice. His family shares his talent and love of the style, and performs in the area as a family band. Moreover, he is an able composer, and has published a number of original compositions and arrangements for orchestra, the latest this evocation of our unique state.

The composer has provided the following guide to his imagination:

Imagine the vast, rugged mountain ranges of Wyoming towering up to the clouds. The opening theme is chorale-like as it depicts the enormity of the mountains. The short triplet theme that appears momentarily throughout the mountain section reminds us of wisps of clouds that appear in the sky. Eventually, the mountain theme dies away and leaves us looking out over the clouds. The clouds look like balls of cotton candy as they race across the sky in a million shapes. As the clouds fly away, we see the rolling prairie and grasslands stretching as far as the eye can see. We see herds of buffalo and antelope and imagine the grand herds of cattle that were first brought to Wyoming to graze. We hear the complexity of ranch and cowboy life and are reminded of the great rodeos in Wyoming (like Cheyenne Frontier Days). This is followed by the hoedown and Saturday night dance. But as the mountain theme comes back, we are reminded that the mountains and wide-open spaces remain supreme in the landscape of Wyoming.

### "Spring" from *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*—Ástor Piazzolla

Ástor Piazzolla has created a musical genre and style that began with the traditional elements of the Argentine tango, but has infused it with much of advanced twentieth century "classical" techniques. The result almost obscures its popular roots. Jazz, Stravinsky, Bartók, dissonance, counterpoint, ubiquitous chromaticism, and varied orchestration—they all are incorporated into Piazzolla's musical take on the tango. Piazzolla was born in Argentina, but moved with his parents in 1924 to New York City, living in Greenwich Village, immersing himself in the musical culture and atmosphere of the great city. Jazz, classical music, the blues—all were his métier—all the while his family exposed him to traditional Argentine music at home, including the sound of the *bandoneón* (the indigenous Argentine accordion, rather like a concertina). He moved back to Argentina in 1936, and there ensued a long and remarkable career as composer of tangos. But, by the early fifties he was immersed in the study of Stravinsky and Bartók, studying composition with Ginastera, listening to lots of jazz, and composing "classical" music. In 1953 he won a major prize with a symphony that he had composed, and was off to Paris to study with the famed Nadia Boulanger. There, she disabused Piazzolla of dreams of

becoming another Bartók, and insisted that he must acknowledge his brilliance in the tango, and to follow it for his success. And so he did, but not without taking with him his deep engagement with the techniques of jazz, blues, and complicated contemporary art music. All of these elements fuse into his signature style: “Nuevo Tango.” You might flippantly call it Stravinsky and Bartók meet Carlos Gardel.

Typically, his works are performed by a small tango group, generally, but not always, consisting of *bandoneón*, violin, electric guitar, double bass, and piano. “Spring,” or “Primavera Porteña,” was composed in 1970 (two of the other “seasons” were written separately and earlier) for solo piano, and then for the small tango group, and like so many of his works, has been rescored for larger ensemble. It is quite representative of his “new tango” style of jagged melodic motifs—often repeated motorically, walking bass lines with a tango thump just before beat four, harmonic chromaticism, and some traditional counterpoint. There are three distinct sections—after Vivaldi’s, but there is none of the latter’s pictorialism. Rather than anything specifically seasonal in this “primavera,” it, like the other three, is generally representative of the city of Buenos Aires. Tango traditionalists were originally horrified by his style of tango, but he now is universally popular—at least with progressives.

### **“Summer” from *Recomposed by Max Richter: Vivaldi—The Four Seasons***

Max Richter, a British citizen, born in Germany, is an internationally renowned composer, recognized for his prolific artistic imagination and adroit blending of classical and popular musical styles and elements. He received a traditional music education, attending the Royal Academy of Music, and studied for a time with the giant of the *avant garde* in music, Lucio Berio (perhaps you may remember the latter’s choral vocal clusters in the soundtrack of the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*). Richter has been a most busy composer, composing works for ballet, the movies, opera, the theatre, and television--and as a performing artist, as well. He seamlessly blends electronic music, recorded sounds, and other effects—whatever is available to sustain his remarkable musical ingenuity. Just the citation of a few of his successful works is evidence of the variety of his musical imagination: elements of the score to the film, *Shutter Island*; an opera based upon the writings of a neuroscientist; a chamber work for strings, piano, and electronics based upon telephone ring tones; and an eight-hour long composition entitled *Sleep*, influenced by the symphonies of Gustav Mahler.

*Recomposed by Max Richter: Vivaldi—The Four Seasons* was given its world première in 2012 in London, and soon went to top of the charts of classical music in both the UK and the US. The conceit of the piece, while seemingly totally new, is nevertheless based on one of the most essential and time-honored of principles in art: the manipulation of elements of previous works by others to create new works, but grounded in, and preserving much of the identity of the antecedents. Museums are replete with painting, sculptures, drawings, collages, and much else that are founded in this principle. So, in *Recomposed by Max Richter: Vivaldi—The Four Seasons*, the composer takes the traditional orchestra and violin soloist, Vivaldi’s textures, his arpeggios, his harmonies, his tempi—everything!—but re-arranges and juxtaposes all that is familiar to create a new work that is so different, yet so derivative. For example, you’ll hear Vivaldi’s chords, but in Richter’s use, they go to different places, or seemingly to no place at all. The extreme directionality of Baroque harmony is replaced with the Post-Modern “floating,” static ambiguity. And the same with Vivaldi’s melodies—they’re there, but now with a languid repetition. Richter has adroitly adopted much of the techniques of electronic music—looping,

phasing, and layering—to a real Baroque orchestra and soloist. The result is much more than one would expect: a marvelous evocation of the original work and its contemporary style, but reduced to micro elements, re-assembled, juxtaposed, in the best techniques of collage art. It's truly Vivaldi without structure, but honored as in a dream.

### **Movement 3 from Violin Concerto No. 2 “The American Seasons”—Philip Glass**

If a composer may play the rôle of America’s foremost public intellectual in the arts, there is arguably no stronger candidate than Philip Glass. For the past half century or so, he has helped shape much of the direction of new and innovative music with his unique approach to composition, his thoughtful and deep exploration of æsthetic principles, and his prolific interaction with leading artists the world over in cinema, the theatre, the visual arts, poetry, dance, and of course, music. Both adored and “reviled,” he has been drawn to the expressive possibilities, and potential for commentary and meaning, in almost every modern artistic genre, technique, and vocabulary. And so, in this pursuit, he has interacted with an astounding number of the “movers and shakers” of contemporary art—from Mick Jagger to Woody Allen.

Much of his music is founded upon repeated elements, and there is no doubt of the “atmospheric” nature of his style. Suffice to say, much of his work challenges convention and presents difficulties with traditional folks who follow the arts. In point of fact, much of his music is conceivably incomprehensible to many in today’s concert-going public. In simple (simplistic?) terms: he is the darling of New York intellectuals, and much of his work does not “play in Peoria.” That being said, there is in his music something to offer almost anyone who is willing to listen with “new ears,” and who finds the right piece among the many different ways his compositions sound. Those sounds may include his epochal opera, *Einstein on the Beach*; the theatre piece, *Hydrogen Jukebox*, with a libretto by Ginsberg; *Dracula* for string quartet (for the 1931 film); electronic instruments; somewhat traditional concertos; and vocal music to texts by Carl Sandburg or Maurice Sendak.

Early on he was attracted to modernists such as Webern, Boulez, Stockhausen, and Berio. But his encounter with the radical French cinema of Godard and Truffaut, Samuel Beckett’s plays, and contemporary visual art moved him on in different directions. While his favorite composer is still Franz Schubert, he identifies the repetitive patterns of classical Indian music and the conception of time in Beckett’s plays as of consequential influence upon him. His early work was lumped in with the “minimalist” movement—appropriately so—wherein constant repetition and variation of small musical “cells” was the strikingly new and economical style. Since the 1970s he has moved on into a variety of innovative styles.

The Violin Concerto No. 2 was composed in 2009 in collaboration with the violinist Robert McDuffie, to whom the work is dedicated, and who gave the première. Together, they conceived it as a contemporary response to Vivaldi’s famous work, and in Glass’ best tradition of challenging, artistic ambiguity, it gives no indications of which of the movements is a referent to any particular “season.” The composer cheerfully leaves it up to the listener. The third movement is a throbbing affair that unceasingly chugs along, with the solo violinist exploring a kaleidoscope of traditional violin figurations and arpeggios, with Glass’ signature paucity of harmonic changes, clear directionality, dynamic contrasts, and most of the other manipulations of traditional music. Rather, he invites the listener to pull back psychologically from the expectations engendered by these elements, and experience the nuances of an economic

simplicity that grows and evolves ever so leisurely. It can be challenging, but nevertheless rewarding to the patient and receptive listener.

### **Concerto No. 4 in F minor, op. 8, RV 297, “Winter,” from *The “Four Seasons”*—Antonio Vivaldi**

Antonio Vivaldi was the most important composer of the Italian Baroque period, although appreciation of that fact was slow in coming in later times. But, during his lifetime he was celebrated all over Europe, and his compositions were highly influential—mostly notably on J. S. Bach. He wrote almost fifty operas, but is remembered now for his amazing fecundity in composing instrumental works. His important publication of concertos, *Il Cimento dell' Armenia e dell'invenzione* (1725), included *The Four Seasons*.

The latter contains four concertos for solo violin and string orchestra, each consisting of three movements, the tempos of which are always respectively fast, slow, and fast. Not only did he give each of them the title of a specific season, he was also the presumed author of the four sonnets, each of which corresponds to a respective concerto, and which describes vividly what the music depicts. As one listens to each of the twelve movements of the four concertos, the “roadmap” is fairly clear. Each opens with a section for the complete orchestra (the *ritornello*), followed by a section for solo violin, accompanied by the orchestra—or a few members of them. The *ritornello* and solo sections alternate—about three times—ending with a final *ritornello*. The solo sections vary in themes and textures, but the *ritornelli* generally cover the same material, so you can usually spot them when they return—although Vivaldi usually altered them a little each time. It is marvelous how the composer is able to evoke the sounds, situations—even the temperatures!—of the various seasons, using only imaginative string figurations, melodies, and tempos. He doesn’t need all the resources of the modern orchestra, at all. The outer movements of the “Winter” concerto come with shivering, horrid winds, frosty snow, and chattering teeth. But, the second movement depicts contentment by the fire—not worrying about the poor folks drenched outside by the rain.

### **Symphony No. 6 in F Major, op. 68 “*Pastoral*”—Ludwig van Beethoven**

In 1808 Beethoven completed his sixth symphony at a time during which he was enjoying a rising popularity, albeit one without financial security. He already had written some of his most memorable and lasting works, and was a composer fully in possession of technical mastery and supreme musicality—in other words, even if he had composed no more, his place in music history would have been secure. His previous symphony, of course, is now the quintessential model of musical works that exemplify so-called economy of means, integrated technique, unified composition, or any other of a number of terms that simply mean one thing more or less: it’s all about the music—not any experience or object in the physical world.

And then Beethoven did something quite unexpected (being Beethoven): he wrote a symphony about something in our real world of experience! Beethoven openly described his sixth symphony as a reflection of feelings about being in the countryside, replete with birdcalls, a rainstorm, and happy peasants. He nicknamed the work “*Pastoral*” himself, and even precisely noted in the score the names of particular species of birds when he wrote imitations of their calls. However, he was intent that the listener not try to exercise his imagination too specifically, when he cautioned that the symphony was really “...more the expression of feelings than painting.”

The feelings were good, though, and after the incredible intensity of the fifth symphony, this one is full of serenity, peaceful contentment, and the untroubled enjoyment of nature. Unique in Beethoven's symphonies, the composer gave each of the five movements (he added an additional one to the more or less standard four) an explanatory title.

But Beethoven, again, being Beethoven, we shouldn't expect loose formal construction. We experience the feelings and understand the allusions to birds, storms, and peasants, but all of it is thoroughly shaped by the same principles of tight, logical musical construction. It's a "perfect classic symphony" that also happens to create a magical evocation of the out of doors.

The first movement is notable for its relaxed exploration of clear-cut themes with little of the tension and drive that we have come to associate with the composer. The harmonies stick to relatively close and straightforward relationships, with little exploration of the remote. There are plenty of rustic little tunes to entertain us as Beethoven skillfully explores the description of the feelings that he alluded to in its title. The second movement is clearly one of his great ones, wherein the composer, as did Schubert, conjures up the brook of the title with a constant murmuring string accompaniment. Listen carefully near the end of the movement for the famous passage of the three birdcalls: one hears successively quite accurate depictions of a nightingale (flute), a thrush (oboe), and a cuckoo (clarinet). The third movement is the standard scherzo, or dance movement, and here we encounter a country festival with a country band. The middle section of this movement is noteworthy for its duple metre (rather like a march), rather than the usual triple (think of a fast waltz). Listen for a bit of Beethoven's rough sense of humor in the bass notes of the second bassoon—a real country bandsman! The fourth movement, of course, is the storm, and Beethoven really goes after some degree of realism, here. He adds the piccolo and two trombones for the first time in this symphony, and they help to achieve the thunder, rain, lightning, and wind effects. The last movement purports to be a "thanksgiving after the storm." One hears a very simple, clear theme—possibly the shepherd's tune--and after a thorough working out of its possibilities, the movement and the symphony ends with the theme played on a muted horn. One of Beethoven's sunniest compositions thus ends peacefully, with a rare look into a part of his personality not often seen.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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