

Program Notes for October 16, 2021

SPIRIT OF 76

We begin our 76th season performing three beloved masterworks with strong connections to a particular country, from both insider and outsider viewpoints. As we slowly emerge from this period of pandemic-induced time at home, and begin to venture further afield, this music provides an interesting lens to consider how composers manage to evoke familiar places, or the new and unfamiliar. Since the Gershwin and Dvorak are explicitly “American” pieces, it is interesting to ponder what is American about them, how composers signify the “American” in music, and also to think about the borrowing and melding that is inherent in American music.

George Gershwin 1898-1937

An American in Paris

(1928)



George Gershwin was a regular traveler, and his decision to compose the tone poem *An American In Paris* originated in the third of his four trips there, in 1926. When he left, his thank you card to his hosts, the Schirmers (of music publishing fame), included a four-measure melody labeled “An American in Paris.” In 1928, Gershwin began the piece using that four-measure melody and trying to evoke the honking of Parisian taxi horns. He tried to incorporate a popular dance melody he had heard in Paris. Interestingly, the piece ultimately became more about the American than the city he was visiting: “As I was not a Frenchman, I knew that I had gotten about as far as I could get with it.”

Gershwin found his imagination and his compositional technique limiting his ability to evoke Paris. Instead, the piece came to focus on how much he missed his home of New York: “I live up on 103rd Street near Riverside Drive, and from the windows of my room I can get a pretty good view of the Hudson. I was walking up and down wondering how to develop this theme into a piece when I glanced out and saw the river. I love that river, and I thought how often I had been homesick for the sight of it, and then the idea struck me – an American in Paris, homesickness, the blues.” In this tone poem, the blues serve as a symbol of the United States in sound, and as a contrast to the playful opening theme. Gershwin wrote this piece over a few years, working mostly in New York but also on return trips to Paris. The piece was premiered by the New York Philharmonic in 1928, receiving very positive reviews. A narrative to accompany the piece,

written by Deems Taylor, was distributed at the premiere, but this has not remained part of the performance tradition. Critics complemented the freshness and vitality of the work, as well as the growth in Gershwin's ability to write longer instrumental music.

As a songwriter, Gershwin's training in writing longer instrumental works was a mixture of self-teaching and seeking out advice from experienced composers of concert music. From the many Europeans he interacted with, he found an appreciation for his gifts, saying "it was quite a paradox to me to find out that, although I went abroad largely to benefit my technic...much more attention is paid there to the *originality of musical material* than to the excellence of its technical development."

Of course, Gershwin's "originality of musical material" is indebted not only to his own gifts, but from his borrowing and adaptation of what has been called "the greater aquifer" of American music – the African-American idiom of the blues. While sometimes fraught with complication, even exploitation, such borrowing and adaptation forms an inevitable aspect of music made in the American melting pot or mosaic, and is perhaps the central feature that makes American music "American."

Sergei Rachmaninoff 1873-1945

Piano Concerto No. 1

(1891/1917/1919)

Rachmaninoff, best known for his piano prelude in C-sharp minor, his second and third piano concerto, and his setting of Russian Orthodox vespers, devoted inconsistent attention to composition throughout his life, given his busy piano and conducting career. Piano was the primary focus of his musical education, and, after he and his family left Russia in 1917, he realized he could better support them as a concert pianist. However, during his main period of compositional activity, Rachmaninoff left us many beautifully crafted works notable for their lyrical melodies and their skilled use of the piano, which serve as the cumulation of the Russian Romantic tradition begun by the more European-oriented Tchaikovsky and the more Russian nationalist composers known as "The Mighty Handful" or "The Five" (Balakirev, Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Borodin).



Though it lacks the popularity of his second and third piano concertos, Rachmaninoff's first piano concerto is underappreciated and well worth your acquaintance. Rachmaninoff composed the first movement in 1891, when he was 17, and the latter two movements when he was 18. This student work may have been modelled on the Grieg piano concerto (the fanfare in brass that begins the piece recalls Grieg). Rachmaninoff seems to have performed the concerto as piano soloist only once, at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he was a student. Twenty-six years later (1917), he revised it significantly, creating the version we hear tonight, which had its American premiere in 1919 with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Spirited outer movements (the first in minor, the final in major) surround a very short nocturne as the middle movement. Though the melodies are not as lush as Rachmaninov's later, better-known, pieces, one can hear the youthful exuberance of a young Rachmaninov, combined with the economy of a more mature composer. Said Rachmaninoff: "I have rewritten my First Concerto; it is really good now. All the youthful freshness is there, and yet it plays itself so much more easily. And nobody pays any attention. When I tell them in America that I will play the First Concerto, they do not protest, but I can see by their faces that they would prefer the Second or Third." We find a similar youthful freshness in Gershwin's *An American in Paris*.



Antonin Dvořák 1841-1904

Symphony No. 9

(1893)

Like Gershwin, Antonin Dvořák was profoundly impacted by his time in a new country, in this case, the United States. Dvořák came to New York to lead the National Conservatory of Music of America, which flourished from its founding in 1885 through the early 1920s. During this period, he wrote his two most famous pieces, the ninth symphony and the cello concerto. The Ninth Symphony is so familiar that it is easy to not think about how it was created. Many composers in the Romantic era became very interested in folk music, particularly of their own culture, and of others that seemed "exotic." Dvořák, however, seemed to be coming from a place of deep respect for American folk cultures. Shortly after his arrival in the United States, he wrote a series of essays urging American composers to root American concert music in Native American and African American musics—a striking departure from what the majority of the American academic and concert music establishment was recommending or doing in that period. When Dvořák's 9th Symphony was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, he carried out his own recommendation.

Dvořák's student, the African-American composer Harry Burleigh, had introduced Dvorak to the rich treasury of African-American spirituals, and Dvorak sought to emulate and pay homage to these exquisite melodies in this piece. In the well-known theme of the second movement, Dvořák was so successful in doing so that many believe he quotes a spiritual, and someone even later penned words for it: "Goin' Home." The Dvořák scholar Joseph Horowitz tells us that "The principal subject of the slow movement—a tune so resembling a spiritual that it later, as *Goin' Home*, became one—was entrusted to the English horn, whose reedy timbre, it has been suggested, resembled Burleigh's voice." There is also evidence that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* may have influenced Dvořák as he wrote this piece, but exactly how remains a mystery. While Dvořák obviously didn't abandon his own style while writing this piece (the third movement sounds very much like one of Dvořák's Slavonic Dances), it does stand distinct from his other work. As we listen to this very familiar piece, pay close attention to the transition from the first movement (E minor) to the beginning of the second (D^b major). What Dvořák accomplishes in just a few chords is sheer genius. Such melding of diverse influences, above all, is what makes music "American."

*Frank Martignetti, Ph.D.
Sacred Heart University*

A Sampling of Survey Comments for our October 16, 2021 Concert

"Magnificent program – comfortable seating – easy access – could not ask for anything more!"

"The orchestra was magnificent, Eric's enthusiasm was contagious, and together they made the night a wonderful experience."

"I liked the energy in the building. Everyone was friendly and welcoming."

"It was great to be back. Mr. Jacobsen knows how to bring out the best of the Bridgeport Symphony. Pianist, Mr. Armstrong, was amazing! Dvorak's 9th Symphony – my favorite – was played with so much feeling. The musicians are great!"

"Only one word: phenomenal!"

"I was so happy to be back."

"Loved hearing about the pieces and composers before the concert."

We also received this comment . . .

“For a family of five, more than one concert at year is no longer possible because the ticket prices on our Row BB went from \$15 to \$29 which [does not] include a handling charge that is unnecessary.”

. . . and we need to respond:

Ticket prices have not been raised since at least 2014. In fact, at \$15 level *was* created in 2016; all of those seats (Level E, colored red on the seating chart) are in the rear of the Balcony.

The handling charge, while small, has been necessary. We incur costs with our ticketing agency, as well as office costs. We will soon be upgrading our ticketing system so that there will be no more add-ons to ticket prices – everything will be included.

We want to be able to serve everyone who has the desire to explore and enjoy Classical music. If your family or group has need of assistance with pricing, we are most happy to try to accommodate you.

Something we want the world to know:

WE OFFER FAMILY PACK DISCOUNTS!

With the Family Pack Discount, all kids under 19 can get any seat on the house for just \$10! Accompanying adults get 15% of their regular ticket price! A family of five (2 adults, 3 children) can get Balcony seats for just \$55.50 total!

The Family Pack is available only by calling our office at (203)576-0263.