

“Symphonic Landscapes”
February 10, 2018

Concert Notes
Prepared by Guest Conductor Bruce Kiesling

Bernstein - Overture to Candide

It can be argued that Leonard Bernstein created the Great American Musical with *West Side Story*. *Candide* was his attempt to duplicate this feat in the opera genre (or actually, comic operetta). Critically, the original production failed to find much of an audience and closed after just over two months. While the esteem of the opera has grown enormously over the years, its overture was an immediate smash and is one of the best-known curtain raisers in the repertoire. Breakneck, exciting, and brilliantly colorful, the overture combines two songs from the opera, the ballad “Oh Happy We” as well as the soprano showpiece “Glitter and Be Gay.”

Borodin - Polovtsian Dances from “Prince Igor”

Trained as a doctor and chemist, Borodin spent his entire career composing only when on vacation or at home with a temporary illness. His greatest musical triumph is the opera *Prince Igor*, left unfinished and completed mostly by Rimsky-Korsakov (a longtime associate of Borodin). Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin were members of the Russian “Mighty Five,” along with Mussorgsky, Balakirev, and Cui. This group of composers was committed to giving their symphonic music a distinctively Russian flavor by quoting Russian folk songs and using folklore and history as source materials for their works.

In the opera, this music occurs as the musicians and dancing girls of the Mongol Chief Khan Konchak entertain the Prince in a series of dazzling and exhilarating dances. Many well-known tunes (including some incorporated in the musical *Kismet!*) populate the dances. Perhaps the most exciting is the parade of tunes which ends the work as we revisit the various dances from earlier in the piece. Although much of what is heard tonight is probably the work of Rimsky-Korsakov’s brilliant ear for orchestration, one cannot deny the penetrating quality of the music, rhythms and melody.

Tomasi - Saxophone Concerto

Michael Couper, Alto Saxophone

Originally intended to become an orchestral instrument, the saxophone and its inventor, Adolphe Sax, could hardly envision that his creation would become one of the most versatile instruments in popular music. Its use in the orchestra, however, has been limited in standard repertoire. Geographically, an exception to this is in France, where the saxophone enjoys featured appearances by many French composers in orchestral compositions as well as a series of great concertos written for the instrument.

Tomasi spent his career as both a composer and conductor, excelling at both. As a composer, he won the prestigious *Prix de Rome* competition and as a conductor, spent the bulk of his career conducting orchestras in the concert hall as well as on the radio.

Tonight’s concerto is in two movements instead of the usual three. The first begins with a mysterious and somewhat dark opening before launching into an off-kilter *Allegro*. A brief cadenza interrupts the quicker music before propelling to the end of the movement. Churning winds open the always-busy second movement while the saxophone takes turns sharing the faster material or singing long, lyric lines around the orchestra. Rather than a burst to the finish, the work closes with a grand *Largo* that wraps up the concerto.

Intermission

Herman - Overture to Hello Dolly

Based on Thornton Wilder’s “The Matchmaker,” the original production of *Hello, Dolly* was a smash box office hit, running more than 2800 performances, earning it the title of longest running Broadway show in history (for a time). Originally titled *Dolly, A Damned Exasperating Woman*, the show was renamed after its most famous song when legendary Broadway producer David Merrick heard Louis Armstrong’s recording of the song. 20th Century Fox produced a film version in 1969, directed by Gene Kelly, which was nominated for 7 academy awards, winning three. The film version includes several songs not heard in the Broadway version, a charming opening number, “Just Leave Everything to Me,” (written specially for star Barbra Streisand) and “Love is only Love” (originally written for *Mame*, but cut before opening on Broadway).

Gershwin - An American in Paris

Legend has it that Gershwin is the godfather of American orchestral music. Critics, however, point to his lack of formal musical education and suggest he merely stole standard jazz idioms from his contemporaries. What is undeniable, though, is that Gershwin is profoundly important to the history of American music. He introduced popular sounds into the traditional symphony orchestra, thereby giving jazz a foothold as a legitimate musical genre.

Much has been made of Gershwin's lack of classical training, and the fact that he did not orchestrate "Rhapsody in Blue" is cited as evidence of this limited musical skills. However, it is interesting to note that both Ravel and Bartok were great admirers of Gershwin and that all his other orchestral works, including the entire score of "Porgy and Bess" were orchestrated by the composer himself.

An American in Paris was written for the New York Symphony (later becoming the New York Philharmonic). In 1936, conductor Walter Damrosch asked Gershwin for a major orchestra work in the style of his recently debuted *Rhapsody in Blue*. Vacationing in France at the time, Gershwin completed most of *An American in Paris* while in Paris. As was his habit, he first composed a two piano version and then wrote the orchestration. Completed by November of that year, the orchestration called for an unusual assortment of instruments, including three saxophones, French taxi horns, and an expanded percussion section.

Of *An American in Paris*, Gershwin wrote, "My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls about the city and listens to various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere...the individual listener can read into the music such as his imagination pictures for him." The piece was an enormous success and has become associated worldwide with the name Gershwin. The work also inspired the 1951 film starring Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron. Including interpolated Gershwin songs and a brilliant ballet sequence featuring nearly all of the symphonic work, the film is considered by many to be the greatest musical ever produced,

Regardless of what his contemporary critics wrote of him, it is clear that Gershwin is an American icon: a master at blending two distinct forms and creating something unique, something entirely American. Inspiring both Copland and Bernstein in his wake, Gershwin has touched all American musicians and his music continues to thrill audiences time and time again.

Bernstein

"Times Square" from "3 Dance Episodes from *On the Town*"

Jazzed-fueled and energetic, *On the Town* tells the story of three navy sailors on leave in New York City for 24 hours. Creating a splash on Broadway when it opened in 1944, a film version released five years later starred Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, and Ann Miller. It was one of the first musicals to be shot on location. Although several of the original songs were dropped from the film version (MGM thought were too complex), the opening number remained Leonard Bernstein's infectious "New York, New York." The version we play tonight originated as the finale to the concert suite which Bernstein prepared. It captures all the thrilling energy and brilliant orchestration of the original Broadway production.

Brown - Singin' In the Rain

Atop AFI's list of the greatest film musicals, *Singin' in the Rain* reigns unchallenged. It may be the greatest combination of great songs, great script (by the brilliant Betty Comden and Adolph Green), great acting, direction, casting, and choreography. It is hard to imagine a more perfect love letter to the era of the great film musical. Chock-full of famous performances and songs, Gene Kelly's tapping, singing, and splashing rendition of the title song is perhaps the most iconic number in the history of the film musical.