

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
October 20/21/22, 2017
Subscription Concert No.2
Michael Allsen

Picturesque scenes from children's tales open our program—Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*. We then welcome back pianist Olga Kern, who is making her fourth appearance with the orchestra. Ms. Kern previously appeared with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2009 (Beethoven's third concerto), 2010 (Rachmaninoff's second concerto), and 2015 (Rachmaninoff's second concerto). On this visit she plays a brilliant American concerto by Samuel Barber. The program ends with Dvorák's powerful "New World" symphony.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Mother Goose Suite

Ravel composed the Mother Goose Suite as a set of piano pieces in 1910, and orchestrated the music as a ballet score in 1911. The orchestral version heard on this program was first performed in 1912. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has performed the work in 1961, 1979, 1991, and 2006. Duration 16:00.

Ravel composed the *Mother Goose Suite* (*Ma Mère l'Oye*) in 1910, as a duet for two young piano students, Mimi and Jean Godebski, the children of his friends Cipa and Ida Godebski. Although Ravel's original intention, that this music serve as an incentive for the children to practice, apparently failed with Mimi and Jean—Mimi was especially obstinate—the piece was soon performed in a recital by two students at the Paris Conservatoire, Christine Verger, age six, and Germaine Duramy, age ten. In 1911, the choreographer Jeanne Hugard asked Ravel to produce a ballet score, and he orchestrated the five movements, together with a newly-composed prelude and interludes. He later extracted the five original movements as an orchestral suite.

The *Mother Goose* tales were first published in 1697 by Charles Perrault, though there were many later additions to the collection. They were as well-known in Ravel's time as they are today, and he drew on five of the most beloved stories for his pieces. The first movement, *Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty* is only 20 measures long, but it concentrates a great deal of grace and beauty into that small space. A quiet evocation of an ancient processional dance, its melody is carried mostly by solo woodwinds above a quiet string and harp background.

The second movement, *Hop-o' My Thumb*, is about the tiny character more often known to Americans as Tom Thumb. Ravel places a brief quotation from *Ma Mère l'Oye* at the beginning of this movement to set the scene:

“He thought that he could easily find his way home by the bread crumbs that he had dropped along the path, but he was very surprised when he found that he could not find a single crumb—birds had eaten them all.”

Ravel creates a sense of bewilderment and searching with a background of constantly-shifting meter, and a plaintive melody passed from one instrument to another. The birds themselves chirp and twitter near the end as they gobble up the crumbs.

The third movement, *Laideronnette, Empress of the Pagodas*, also begins with a quotation:

“She undressed herself and went into the bath. The *pagodes* and *pagodines* began to sing and play on instruments. Some had oboes made of walnut shells and others had violas made of almond shells—for they had to have instruments that were of their own small proportions.”

This one needs some explanation. A *pagoda* was a Chinese figurine with a grotesque face and a movable head: a popular decorating accessory in 18th-century France. In the story, *Laideronnette* is a Chinese princess who has been cursed with horrible ugliness, and wanders for years, her only companion an equally ugly green serpent. Eventually they are shipwrecked in the island of the *pagodas*, little porcelain people who take her as their queen. In the end, she marries the serpent (a handsome prince in disguise...of course), and they both get magical makeovers and return to their former good-looking selves. Ravel's use of pentatonic melodies and the prominence of the glockenspiel, xylophone, and gong give this movement a quasi-Oriental feel.

The fourth movement is titled *Conversation of the Beauty and the Beast*. Here Ravel includes a pair of dialogues from the story:

“When I think of how good-hearted you are, you do not seem to me to be so ugly.”

“Yes, indeed—I have a good heart, but I am still a monster.”

“There are many men more monstrous than you.”

“If I were smart enough, I would invent a fine compliment to thank you, but I am only a beast.”

—

“Beauty, will you be my wife?”

“No, Beast!”

“Then I die content, having the pleasure of seeing you again”

“No, dear Beast, you shall not die—you shall live to be my husband!”

In Ravel’s setting, the clarinet takes the part of Beauty, with a lovely lilting waltz, while the Beast is characterized by a grotesque contrabassoon theme. When Beauty declares her love, their melodies are combined. There is a magical moment, from the harp and triangle, and the Beast then reappears in the solo violin, showing that he has been transformed to his former state, a handsome prince (of course!).

The final movement, *The Fairy Garden*, is a set of free variations on a slow and lyrical melody presented by the strings. In the 1911 ballet score, Ravel describes this movement as an “apotheosis”—a slow procession of the Prince and Princess through the Fairy Godmother’s garden. The movement closes, suitably, with wedding bells.

Samuel Barber (1910-1981) **Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, Op.38**

Barber’s piano concerto was written in 1961 and 1962. It was one of several works which the music publishing firm G. Schirmer commissioned to celebrate its centenary. The concerto was written for pianist John Browning, who played the premiere at New York’s Lincoln Center with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on September 24, 1962. We have performed the work once previously in 1999, with John Browning as soloist. Duration 29:00.

In 1959, Lincoln Center in New York City was still just a hole in the ground. The management was already planning for the complex’s completion however, and asked a cadre of America’s most distinguished composers to write new works to celebrate the opening: Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Henry Cowell, William Schuman, and Barber. This request coincided with the 100th anniversary of Barber’s publisher, G. Schirmer, who commissioned a piano concerto for the Lincoln Center series. (According to a radio interview, Barber’s price for the commission was an entirely different sort of hole in the ground—a swimming pool for his upstate New York home!)

This was a concerto that was tailor-made for its intended soloist, the young American virtuoso John Browning. At one point, Barber had Browning play his entire repertoire, in order to get an accurate idea of his strengths as a player, and he frequently consulted Browning during the work's composition. Though Barber made quick progress on the concerto, his work was interrupted in the final stages by an extended trip to Russia in the spring early summer of 1962—he was the first American ever invited to attend the biennial Congress of Soviet Composers. The score was finished on September 9, 1962, giving Browning just two weeks to learn the concerto. The premiere was a resounding success, and the concerto was soon heard across the United States: Browning performed it in tour some thirty times during the 1962-63 season alone. The work also won the Pulitzer Prize in music for 1962 (Barber's second Pulitzer). The composer provided the following notes for the premiere performance:

“The concerto begins with a solo for piano in *recitative* style, in which three themes or figures are announced, the first declamatory, the second and third rhythmic. The orchestra interrupts, *più mosso*, to sing the impassioned main theme, not before stated. All this material is now embroidered more quietly and occasionally whimsically by piano and orchestra, until the tempo slackens (*doppio meno mosso*) and the oboe introduces a second lyric section. A development along symphonic lines leads to a cadenza for soloist, and a recapitulation with a *fortissimo* ending.

“The second movement (*Canzona*) is songlike in character, the flute being principal soloist. The piano enters with the same material, which is subsequently sung by muted strings, to the accompaniment of piano figurations. [Note: This movement is an expansion of Barber's 1959 *Elegy* for flute and piano. - M.A.]

“The last movement (*Allegro molto*, in 5/8), after several fortissimo repeated chords by the orchestra, plunges headlong into an ostinato bass figure for piano, over which several themes are tossed. There are two contrasting sections (one ‘*un pochettino meno*’ for clarinet solo, and one for three flutes, muted trombones, and harp, ‘*con grazia*’) where the fast tempo relents, but the ostinato figure keeps insistently reappearing, mostly by the piano protagonist, and the 5/8 meter is never changed.”

Antonín Dvorák (1841-1904)
Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op.95 (“From the New World”)

Dvorák composed this work in New York in the winter and spring of 1892-93. Anton Seidl conducted the New York Philharmonic in the first performance on December 16, 1893. It has been performed six times at these concerts between 1930 and 2014. Duration 40:00.

In 1892, Jeannette Thurber made Dvorák an offer he couldn't refuse. Thurber, the wife of a wealthy New York businessman, had a dream of raising the standards of American art music to equal those of Europe. She had founded the National Conservatory of Music in 1885, and recruited some of the finest teachers in the world to serve on its faculty. At this time, Dvorák's reputation as a symphonist was surpassed only by that of Brahms, and Thurber resolved to hire him as the director of the Conservatory. Dvorák was lukewarm at first, but the terms she offered were very generous: a two-year contract, with very light teaching duties and four months' paid leave each year. The annual salary, \$15,000, was about 25 times what Dvorák was making as an instructor at the Prague Conservatory, and in the end he accepted, eventually spending about three years in this country.

Dvorák enjoyed this American sojourn. American audiences adored his music, and he blended comfortably into New York society. He spent two summers in the small town of Spillville, Iowa, where he felt at home in a large Bohemian community. He had several promising composition students at the Conservatory, and agreed heartily with Thurber's ideal that American composers should foster their own distinctive style of composition. He wrote that:

“My own duty as a teacher is not so much to interpret Beethoven, Wagner, and other masters of the past, but to give what encouragement I can to the young musicians of America... this nation has already surpassed so many others in marvelous inventions and feats of engineering and commerce, and it has made an honorable place for itself in literature—so it must assert itself in the other arts, and especially in the art of music.”

The “New World” symphony is the most famous of the works Dvorák composed while in America. According to Thurber, the symphony was written at her suggestion—she felt that Dvorák should write a symphony “...embodying his experiences and feelings in America.” It was an immediate hit with audiences in both America and Europe. The new symphony closely matched the style of his other late symphonies, a style based on the German symphonic style of his mentor,

Brahms, and with occasional hints of Bohemian folk style. There are a few “Americanisms” in the *Symphony No.9*, however. As a strongly nationalistic Bohemian, Dvorák had always brought the spirit of his homeland into his works by bringing in folk tunes, and by more generally imitating the sound of Bohemian music. According to his own account of the work’s composition, Dvorák attempted to do the same with regards to American music in the *Symphony No.9*, and he was particularly interested in two forms of music that had their origins in the United States: Native American music and African American spirituals. Dvorák frequently quizzed one his students at the National Conservatory, a talented young African American singer named Harry T. Burleigh, about spirituals, and he dutifully transcribed every spiritual tune Burleigh knew. His contact with Native American music was a little more tenuous—most of what Dvorák knew came from rather dubious published transcriptions. (The only time he ever heard an “authentic” Indian performance was when he went to Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show!) While he did not use any true American melodies in the symphony, Dvorák immersed himself in American music and culture, and wrote musical themes from this inspiration. At its heart, however, the *Symphony No.9* is a work “*From the New World*” by an Old World composer. Dvorák was not trying to create an “American Style”—he firmly believed that that was a job for American composers.

The opening movement begins with an *Adagio* introduction, which gradually speeds and resolves into the main body of the movement (*Allegro molto*). Dvorák immediately announces the main theme, a distinctive motto that will appear, in one form or another, in every movement of the symphony. This bold E minor theme is first played by the horns, and then expanded by the strings. He introduces two contrasting melodies, a dancelike minor-key melody in, introduced by the oboe, and somewhat brighter theme heard in the solo flute. This sonata-form movement features a lengthy development section, which focuses on the motto theme. After a conventional recapitulation, Dvorák sets a long coda, which again explores the motto theme.

There are a few programmatic elements in the *Symphony No.9*—according to Dvorák, the second and third movements were inspired by Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha*. In the *Largo* we have *Hiawatha*’s “Funeral in the Forest.” This movement is set in a broad three-part form. It opens with a solemn brass chorale, which leads into the movement’s main theme, a long Romantic melody played by the English horn. (This melody became popular as nostalgic song called *Goin’ Home*—so popular, in fact, that it was widely assumed that it was a traditional spiritual that Dvorák had quoted!) The contrasting middle section features a more

pensive melody heard first in the flute. The movement ends with a return of the English horn melody.

Dvorák again referred to *Hiawatha* in the Scherzo (*Molto vivace*), stating that this movement was supposed to depict "...a feast in the wood, where the Indians dance." The first section features two main themes, an offbeat melody introduced by solo woodwinds and a more lyrical melody played by the woodwinds as a section. Echoes of the motto theme lead gradually into a central trio. The trio section is certainly dancelike, but its waltz-style themes seem to have a lot more to do with a Viennese ballroom than a Native American dance. The opening section returns, and Dvorák closes the movement with more reminiscences of the motto theme.

The finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) begins with a few stormy introductory measures, and then Dvorák brings in the main theme in the brass. After this powerful theme, there is a more lyrical melody in the solo clarinet. Dvorák set the finale in sonata form, but he used the lengthy development not only to work with this movement's themes, but also to develop music from previous movements. In particular, we hear versions of the motto and a faster reading of the *Largo*'s main theme. After recapitulating the fourth movement's main themes, Dvorák launches into a huge coda, which again brings back material from previous movements.