

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
November 12-13-14, 2021
96th Season
Michael Allsen

This varied program opens with our first performance of Honegger's *Rugby*, a wild celebration of athleticism. The Madison Symphony Orchestra then welcomes the young Cuban-American cellist Thomas Mesa, who makes his Overture Hall debut with Dvořák's great *Cello Concerto*. Following intermission, we perform the music of African-American composer George Walker, his wistful *Lyric for Strings*. We end with the *Grand Canyon Suite*, Grofé's vivid portrait of the American Southwest...accompanied on this program by projected images of the equally vivid landscapes it depicts.

Honegger's 1928 *Rugby* is a musical picture of a rugby match. Like the game itself, Honegger's music is often rough and even violent...and ends with a rowdy victory celebration!

Arthur Honegger

Born: March 10, 1892, Le Havre, France.

Died: November 27, 1955, Paris, France.

Rugby (Mouvement symphonique No. 2)

- **Composed:** 1928.
- **Premiere:** October 19, 1928 in Paris, conducted by Ernest Ansermet.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 8:00.

Background

Swiss-French Arthur Honegger was a member of the influential group of young composers that French critics labeled *Les Six*—a group that sought to create a new, straightforward, and distinctly French style in the years after the first world war. Honegger's music was generally more serious in tone than that of his *Les Six* colleagues Milhaud, Poulenc, and Satie, but, like other members of the group, he was willing to incorporate virtually any sort of musical influence into his composition. His compositions incorporate elements as diverse as Gregorian chant, American jazz, natural sounds, and even industrial sounds—as in his famous *Pacific 231*, an evocation of a steam engine by a symphony orchestra.

His work up through the second world war was dominated by oratorios, operas, ballets and other theatrical music, and film scores. (Honegger was one of France's first great film composers.) During the war he taught in Paris at the National School of Music, and turned increasingly to the symphony, writing the last four of his five symphonies in 1940-1950.

Rugby is the second of three modernist “symphonic movements” Honegger composed between 1923 and 1946 (*Pacific 231* was *Mouvement symphonique No. 1*). According to the composer, the piece had its origins in a 1927 conversation with the sports editor for one of the Parisian newspapers. Honegger jokingly suggested that he could imagine a symphonic poem based upon a rugby match, and the journalist clearly took him seriously enough to publish an announcement that Honegger was in fact working on such a piece. The amused composer eventually did compose *Rugby*, which would become one of his most often-played short orchestral pieces.

What You'll Hear

French critic André George described the premiere of *Rugby* in October 1928:

“... *Rugby* is first of all a ‘movement of teams’ (a *mélée* of bodies = counterpoint, the two opposing camps = two musical themes)...and a lyrical dynamism. Between the beginning in D Major and the ending in the same key, there are naturally many intermediate ‘passes,’ but the orchestra, with a single impulse, irresistibly and simply breathes the healthfulness and joy of sport.”

The action begins immediately with forceful and dissonant music. Though Honegger did not publish a specific program, it is perfectly easy to imagine all of the action of a rugby match—tackles, scrums, and open-field runs—in his energetic and sometimes disjointed music. It closes with what is obviously a short, joyful celebration by the winning team.

Dvořák's *Cello Concerto*, certainly one of the longest and most profound concertos for the instrument, was written during his sojourn in the United States during the 1890s. This work is “symphonic” in scope, beginning with an extended and intense opening movement, and continuing through a lovely slow movement based upon one of his songs, and an aggressive finale.

Antonín Dvořák

Born: September 8, 1841, Nelahozeves, Czech Republic.

Died: May 1, 1904, Prague, Czech Republic.

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra in B minor, Op. 104

- **Composed:** 1894-95.
- **Premiere:** March 19, 1896 in Queens Hall, London, with Leo Stern as soloist and Dvořák conducting.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1967 (Raya Garbousova), 1977 (Zara Nelsova), 1995 (Desmond Hoebig), 2005 (Carter Brey), and 2010 (Alisa Weilerstein).
- **Duration:** 40:00.

Background

Three of Dvořák's most profound works were written during his three-year stay in America (1892-95): the *Symphony No. 9* ("from the New World"), his F Major string quartet, and the concerto heard on this program. The immediate inspiration for his cello concerto may have been a performance of a concerto by Victor Herbert, then principal cellist with the New York Philharmonic. However, his friend Hanus Wihac, cellist of the Bohemian Quartet had been urging him to write a concerto even before Dvořák left for America.

The first sketches of the concerto date from the spring of 1894, when Dvořák was briefly back in Bohemia. He completed the score in New York City in February of 1895. When he returned to Prague in April of that year, he handed the score over to Wihac, who carefully edited the solo part. However, Dvořák made several more revisions to the concerto, and when it was published in 1896, very few of Wihac's ideas were used. This chilled their friendship, and Wihac seems to have been especially disappointed by revisions made to the end of the third movement. He had requested that the concerto end with a grand virtuoso cadenza, but at the last minute Dvořák changed the last 60 measures to round off the concerto in a more contemplative mood. In the end, even though the published score was dedicated to Wihac, he declined to play the premiere. This concerto was to be Dvořák's last completed orchestral work.

The movements of the concerto are symphonic in size, dwarfing Dvořák's violin concerto of 1882. Indeed, parts of it may originally have been conceived in the composer's mind as a symphony. When some friends from New York City took him to visit Niagara Falls in 1892, he was deeply impressed, and exclaimed: "My

word, that is going to be a symphony in B minor!” This symphony was never written, but the B minor cello concerto might well have had its roots in this moment of excitement. There is also a moment of much more personal significance in the second movement. Its lyrical second theme is drawn from one of Dvořák’s songs, *Lasst mich allein in meinen Träumen gehn* (“Let me wander alone in my dreams,” Op.82). This seems to have been a tribute to Dvořák’s sister-in-law Josefina Kauric. The composer had fallen deeply in love with her as a young man in the 1860s, but she did not return his love. Dvořák would eventually marry Josefina’s sister Anna, but he and Josefina remained close friends throughout their lives. He was devastated when he received word in New York that Josefina was dying. The song was a favorite of hers, and its text probably reflects Dvořák’s emotions at the time.

What You’ll Hear

The opening movement (*Allegro*) begins quietly in the woodwinds, but soon reaches a tremendous peak, with full orchestra building on the opening idea. The lovely second theme is laid out by the horn and clarinet. When the soloist enters, it is with aggressive variations of the opening theme. The cello’s treatment of the second theme is much more straightforward and lyrical, although it quickly spins off into an ornate set of runs. The full orchestra returns to round off the exposition with a statement of the first theme, and the relatively brief development section is taken up with emotionally reserved treatments of this theme. At the end, Dvořák brings back the themes in reverse order. The movement ends with a dazzling cadenza-style passage by the soloist and a triumphant statement of the main theme by the brass.

The slow movement (*Adagio non troppo*) begins with a lovely folklike melody in the solo clarinet, which is then taken up and given broader treatment by the cello. The second idea, Dvořák’s tribute to his beloved Josefina, appears after a forceful passage for full orchestra. This melody is expanded in conversations between the soloist and the woodwinds. The orchestra returns forcefully to announce a more tragic central section. Throughout this episode, Dvořák makes prominent use of woodwind soloists, and he rounds it off with a beautiful horn chorale. When the folklike theme returns, it is highly ornamented by the soloist and overlaid by a solo flute. In the conclusion, the orchestral accompaniment remains quietly in the background, allowing the cello to carry the most expressive moments in the concerto.

The final movement (*Allegro*) is a rondo, with a march-style main theme introduced by the horns, and quickly developed by the cello. The first contrasting

episode has the cello playing above a sparse woodwind background, but this theme is eventually expanded to full strength, and rounded off with ominous trombone chords. After a brief return of the march music, Dvořák begins another contrasting section, now in a slower tempo and a major key. The cello touches upon the march theme again, and the closing episode comes as a series of reminiscences of themes from previous movements. At the end, the orchestra provides a brief coda, with a final forceful statement of the march.

The music of American composer George Walker appears for the first time at our concerts: his *Lyric for Strings*, a quiet and lovely work written as a memorial to his grandmother.

George Walker

Born: June 27, 1922, Washington, DC.

Died: August 23, 2018, Montclair, New Jersey.

Lyric for Strings

- **Composed:** This was composed in 1941, as part of Walker's *First String Quartet*, and reworked for string orchestra in 1946.
- **Premiere:** March 22, 1947, in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Richard Bales conducting.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 6:00.

Background

Composer and pianist George Walker was born in Washington, DC, and his first musical training was from his mother and at the Howard University Prep School. By age 18, Walker had already graduated from the Oberlin Conservatory and went on to study at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute before touring successfully as a pianist. He later attended the American Academy in Fontainbleu, France where, like many American composers of his generation, he studied with the great composition teacher Nadia Boulanger. He completed a Ph.D at the Eastman School of Music. By the time he retired in 1992, Walker had had a distinguished career as an academic, teaching composition at Rutgers University, Smith College, the Peabody Conservatory and others. In 1996, Walker became the first living African American composer to win a Pulitzer Prize in Music—for his 1995 composition *Lilacs*.

What You'll Hear

Lyric for Strings was originally the slow movement of string quartet Walker composed when he was just eighteen, and a student at the Curtis Institute. Originally titled *Lament*, Walker described the piece as a memorial to his grandmother, Malvina King, who died shortly before he wrote it. It develops from a stark and simple beginning to a long free-flowing melody. This flowing music alternates with a series of solemn chords. The music reaches a restrained climax near the midpoint and fades gently away.

Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite* is certainly one of the most famous musical works inspired by the American landscape. Beginning with sections that depict a glorious sunrise and the shimmering heat of the Painted Desert, Grofé moves to a humorous donkey ride and a lonesome cowboy song, before ending with a quiet sunset and a ferocious thunderstorm.

Ferde Grofé (1892-1972)

Born: March 27, 1892, New York City.

Died: April 3, 1972, Santa Monica, California.

Grand Canyon Suite

- **Composed:** completed in the summer of 1931.
- **Premiere:** November 22, 1931, in Chicago, by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** Once previously at our subscription concerts in 2004, but we have performed excerpts and the complete *Suite* at many previous Youth and Pops programs since 1950.
- **Duration:** 33:00.

Background

Grofé's *Grand Canyon Suite* was the last product of his long association with the bandleader Paul Whiteman. Born in New York City, Grofé received classical training in Germany as a child. He spent his teens working as a violinist and pianist in dance bands. Though he was familiar with classical music, and eventually played in the Los Angeles Symphony, Grofé became increasingly involved with the new style known as "rhythm music" or jazz, and worked as a pianist and arranger in early Los Angeles jazz bands. He was hired as an arranger by Whiteman, the self-styled "King of Jazz," in 1920, and was largely responsible for creating Whiteman's successful "symphonic jazz" style. In 1924, he provided the arrangement for Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, and later composed many

successful works for the Whiteman Orchestra. By 1930, Grofé's music was becoming more "symphonic" than "jazz," and in 1931, he composed his *Grand Canyon Suite*. Though it is based upon a famous American landmark, the *Grand Canyon Suite* is programmatic music very much in the European classical tradition.

The piece was written at Whiteman's request in the summer of 1931, and Grofé retreated to "a secluded lakeside cottage in Wisconsin" to finish the work. Though the piece is a tonal picture of Arizona's most famous landmark, most of Grofé's direct inspiration came from closer to home. The gallumphing donkeys of *On the Trail* were probably based on the rhythm of pile drivers at work outside of Grofé's Chicago apartment, and the cowboy ballad at the middle of that movement apparently came from the squeaking of his son's baby carriage. And the inspiration for the famous *Cloudburst* finale was not the spectacular weather of the Grand Canyon, but a Wisconsin thunderstorm that Grofé witnessed at his cottage near Hayward!

The *Suite* became a factor in Grofé's angry split from Whiteman. After Whiteman moved to Chicago in 1930, Grofé's role as lead arranger was largely taken over by another musician, and he began to moonlight as an arranger for radio and for other bands. The *Grand Canyon Suite* was a tremendous success when Whiteman introduced it in the fall of 1931, so much so, that it became Grofé's ticket out of the band. He began to conduct performances of the piece that did not involve Whiteman; the last straw was when he arranged for a concert in New York that competed directly with a Whiteman show. They did not speak for years afterwards, and even though they would reunite later for revivals of the Whiteman Orchestra, they were never again on friendly terms. For his part Grofé went on to a successful career as a conductor and composer for radio and film. The *Grand Canyon Suite* remains his most familiar work, particularly in the full orchestra version, first recorded by Arturo Toscanini in 1935.

What You'll Hear

Sunrise, the opening movement, is based upon a continuously-rising ostinato that builds to a great orchestral climax, as woodwind chirps and twitters stand in for the awakening birds. *Painted Desert* is a quiet moment of mysterious Impressionist effects, portraying the stark beauty and heat of this landscape. *On the Trail* is Grofé's famous sound portrait of the donkey trains that carry tourists down into the canyon. After a "hee-haw" of protest and a brief violin cadenza, the donkeys begin a steady pace down the precipitous trail. At the bottom, there is a more lyrical cowboy song, as the tourists rest their saddle sores in preparation for the long ride home. *Sunset*, opens with a horn call, answered by the main theme, played in rather

spooky string timbres. The movement eventually dies away to into darkness. There are many orchestral renditions of thunderstorms, but Grofé's *Cloudburst* has to be one of the most effective. It begins quietly, but moves inexorably towards a crashing climax, driven by ostinato-style writing in the brass, and flashes of orchestral lightning. In the end, the storm fades away and is replaced by a broad statement of the cowboy tune from *On the Trail*.

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