

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
Overture Concert Organ Series No.2
February 15, 2022
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In this concert, the Madison Symphony Orchestra's principal organist, Greg Zelek, and countertenor Reginald Mobley perform a program including a diverse range of styles: from Baroque arias by Bach, Handel, and Purcell and organ works by Bach and Liszt, to Black spirituals, Gospel music, and George Gershwin. Also included are rarely-heard art songs and an organ work by pioneering African American composers Harry S. Burleigh and Florence Price.

Traditional Spiritual, *Deep River* (arr. Moses Hogan)

One of America's first great homegrown musical traditions, the spiritual had its origins in the culture of enslaved Africans in the early 19th century. Spirituals, whether reflective "sorrow songs" or joyful "jubilees," were informal hymns that often celebrated the afterlife that awaited after the bitterness and pain of slavery. Many of these songs predate the Civil War, and were passed down through the oral tradition. In the later 19th century, the spiritual became the first of many Black musical styles that became part of the broader American culture. They were first popularized by the famous Fisk Jubilee Singers and other Black performers, and were later collected and published by arrangers like Harry T. Burleigh. Since the early 20th century, African-American singers like Marian Anderson, Jessye Norman, and many others have also made it a tradition to incorporate spirituals into classical programs. One of the one of the most famous spirituals, *Deep River*, is first mentioned in print in 1867, but it certainly comes from before Emancipation. Like many of these songs, there are subtle shades of meaning: crossing the Jordan River is a metaphor for crossing into the next life, but for enslaved Blacks of the early 19th century, freedom often met crossing a *real* body of water, the Ohio or Mississippi, into a free state, or the Great Lakes or St. Lawrence into Canada.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), *Widerstehe doch der Sünde*, BWV 54 and *Fugue in A minor*, BWV 543

The great majority of Bach's sacred cantatas were written in the 1720s, during his first few years working as a church musician in Leipzig. However, he also composed cantatas for most of his earlier postings. His cantata for solo alto, *Widerstehe doch der Sünde* (*Stand firm against sin*), which was composed while he

was working the ducal court of Weimar in 1708-17. Bach served as organist, and after 1714, as the court's music director, a position whose duties included producing a new cantata each month to be sung in the court chapel. Most of his church cantatas were written for a specific Sunday or holiday within the church year, and *Widerstehe doch der Sünde* has usually been dated to 1714 or 1715, either for the third Sunday in Lent or Trinity Sunday. However, more recent biographers have suggested that was composed a year or more before 1714, and that this piece—an encouragement to avoid the traps of sin—was not tied to a particular part of the church year. The brief libretto comes from a set of cantata texts published in 1711, by the poet Georg Christian Lehms. Written originally for alto voice and a small string ensemble with continuo, the cantata is played here with organ accompaniment. The opening aria begins with a striking dissonance: probably a pointed musical reference to the “poisons of sin” described in the text. Like most contemporary arias, is set in *da capo* form: two contrasting musical sections, and a concluding repeat of the opening section that allows for ornamentation by the soloist. Here the opening section is rather relaxed, while the second section, with its reference to Satan is more tense.

The *Fugue in A minor* also dates from Bach's years in Weimar. Bach is of course recognized today as the great Baroque master of the fugue. This is certainly a masterful example, written by a young Bach, but it also imitates the style of his own acknowledged master, Dieterich Buxtehude. In 1705, the 20-year-old Bach took a leave from his church position in Arnstadt to walk 250 miles to Lübeck, where he hoped to study with Buxtehude—the only truly long journey Bach ever made. Though he was not exactly AWOL from Arnstadt, his employers complained that Bach had requested a four-week leave, but stayed away for “about four times that long.” Just how much he actually studied with Buxtehude is unclear, but several of his organ works over the next few years clearly show his admiration for Buxtehude's music. The *Fugue in A minor* is set in 6/8, lending a dancing quality to this intensely complex work. In the opening, the fugue subject is presented four times, lastly by the pedals. The fugue includes some long, chromatic episodes—typically passages without the fugue's opening subject, though Bach subtly manages to work in fragments of this theme. The ending is dramatic: the writing for the manuals fades away, leaving the pedals exposed for a final showy passage. The work ends with a brilliant flourish from the manuals.

George Friderick Handel (1685-1759), *Più non cura*, from *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*

Handel is of course forever linked with the oratorio: the great series of English oratorios he began writing in the 1730s, particularly *Messiah* of 1741, remain some of his most often-performed works. However his first oratorio, *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (*The Triumph of Time and Disillusionment*), was composed long before these famous English works. Handel had written his first Italian operas while working in Hamburg, and in the fall of 1706, the 21-year old composer travelled to Italy. After producing his opera *Rodrigo* in Florence, he moved on to Rome by the end of 1706, and spent the next two years there. Italian opera was at the time banned in Rome, but its place was taken by large-scale productions of Italian oratorios. The oratorio, essentially an unstaged sacred opera, had originated as a form in Rome a century earlier. Handel wrote two oratorios in Rome, *Il trionfo* in early 1707, and *La Resurrezione* (*The Resurrection*) in April 1708. The most important Roman sponsors of music were the wealthy cardinals, who maintained large musical establishments, and competed in mounting lavish performances. *Il trionfo* was performed in the palace of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, one of Rome's leading patrons. Leading the orchestra was Archangelo Corelli, Rome's greatest violinist, and an important composer in his own right. Handel and Corelli reportedly clashed at rehearsals, when Corelli claimed not to understand the music of the overture, which was in the French style. Handel eventually wrote a new, more Italianate overture, with a showy violin part for Corelli. (The phrase "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." was already ancient in 1707, and clearly applied here!) Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili wrote the libretto, an allegory with a Christian message. The characters are Belleza (Beauty), Piacere (Pleasure), Tempo (Time), and Disinganno (usually translated as "Disillusionment," but perhaps better understood as "Undeceived.") Belleza is initially seduced by Piacere, and Tempo and Disinganno patiently reason with her to resist. Belleza eventually rejects the attractions of Piacere to begin a life of penitence and prayer. The roles of Piacere (soprano) and Disinganno (alto) were probably intended for male *castrati*, but they are typically performed today by countertenor or female voice. The *da capo* aria *Più non cura* (*No longer does he care*) is sung by Disinganno to Belleza in Act II, a gentle, pastoral song of persuasion. Handel was clearly fond of this early oratorio, and reworked it for performances in England decades later: first in 1737, still in Italian, and again in 1757, as *The Triumph of Time and Truth*.

Florence Price (1887-1953), *Because and Sunset*
Harry T. Burleigh (1866-1949), *Jean*

This program includes three works by Florence Price, beginning with two of her art songs. Price was born Florence Smith in Little Rock, Arkansas, into a well-respected family. (Her father was the only Black dentist in this strictly segregated

city.) She studied at the New England Conservatory of Music, graduating in 1906. She then taught music for several years in Atlanta and Little Rock, but following a lynching in Little Rock in 1927, her family resettled in Chicago, where she would spend the rest of her life. It was in Chicago that Price finally began to have success as a composer. However, she struggled financially, particularly after she divorced her abusive husband in 1931, leaving her single mother to two daughters. Price wrote advertising jingles and popular songs under a pen name and played organ in silent movie theaters to pay the bills, but her classical compositions began to attract attention. This culminated in 1932, when her *Symphony No.1* was performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—the first work by an African American woman to be played by a major orchestra. Though her music continued to be played and championed by star performers like Marian Anderson, she struggled to make ends meet throughout her life. Interest in Price’s music has increased dramatically following the 2009 discovery of a collection of some 200 of her pieces, including many previously lost works.

Price wrote for the solo voice throughout her life, both settings of spirituals and original art songs. The art songs heard here, *Because* and *Sunset*, come from a collection published by Richard Heard in 2015 that includes 44 of her art songs and spiritual arrangements, nearly all of them published for the first time. The solemn *Because* sets a 1905 poem (originally titled *Compassion*) of Paul Laurence Dunbar, widely considered to be America’s first influential Black poet. Like many of her settings of noted Black poets like Dunbar and Langston Hughes, this music emulates the sound of the spiritual in its simple, unadorned melody, and in the striking “blue note” near the end. It is a truly effective setting of this poem of unrequited love. Little is known of the poet Odessa P. Elder, who wrote *Sunset*. Price gave this highly romantic text—wistful memories of an unnamed “golden town” inspired by a beautiful sunset—an appropriately romantic setting.

Born a generation before Price, Harry T. Burleigh was a pioneer in fusing Black musical styles, particularly the spiritual, and Western classical music. He studied with Antonín Dvořák in the 1890s, when the Bohemian composer was in the United States, teaching at the National Conservatory in New York City. It was Burleigh who introduced Dvořák to the spiritual, an influence on Dvořák’s well-known “New World” Symphony. Burleigh had a successful career as a singer, but was particularly well-known for his published arrangements of spirituals: arrangements that brought this style into the homes and churches of thousands of Americans of all races. Burleigh was also a composer in his own right, writing well over 200 compositions, most of them art songs. His *Jean* was published in 1903, with a dedication to Mrs. James (Ellin Prince) Speyer, a New York philanthropist

noted for her work to help Black women and children. *Jean* would be one of Burleigh's greatest successes. In 1916, a writer in the *New York Age*, one of America's leading African-American newspapers, called it "one of the most popular songs ever heard from the concert stage." *Jean* is a thoroughly romantic setting of a sentimental poem by Frank L. Stanton.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886), *Liebstraum No.3* (arr. Nigel Potts)

Franz Liszt was the preeminent piano virtuoso of the 19th century, and the model for many pianists to follow. He was also an imaginative and ground-breaking composer, but as a young man, he was so much in demand as a soloist that he was allowed little time to develop his composing skills. Liszt's concert tours in the 1830s and 1840s were nothing short of phenomenal—contemporaries used the term "Lisztomania" to describe the frenzy surrounding his playing. He performed hundreds of concerts to packed houses throughout Europe, and produced for the most part compositions that focused on his own technical showmanship, rather than musical content. It was not until he settled in Weimar in 1848, taking a secure and stable job as music director to the Weimar court, that Liszt's music takes a turn away from these showy pieces. Among other experiments, he began to explore the idea of program music: works that tell a story or which are based upon poems, paintings, or other nonmusical inspirations. Most famous are a series of symphonic poems written in Weimar, but he also wrote programmatic works for piano. In 1850, he published an innovative set of three piano works titled *Liebesträume* (*Dreams of Love*). Each of these works is based upon a poem, and each represents an aspect of love: exalted love in *No.1*, erotic love in *No.2*, and mature, unconditional love in *No.3*. *Liebstraum No.3*, the most popular of the three, was inspired by Hermann Ferdinand Freilgrath's *O lieb, so lang du lieben kannst!* The poem's opening stanza, repeated as a refrain, translates as: "O love, love as long as you can! / O love, love as long as you will! / The time will come, the time will come, / when you will stand grieving at the grave." Liszt's interpretation of this poem opens with a lyrical melody supported by gentle keyboard figures. The middle section begins in the same way, but moves into more agitated music. After a dreamy cadenza, Liszt returns to a meditative and sad version the opening music, and ends with a wistful coda.

Henry Purcell (1659-1695), *Music for a While*

Henry Purcell was the most important English composer of theatrical music prior to the 20th century. English-language opera had a relatively brief heyday in the later 17th century, after the Restoration of the royalty, and before English tastes

turned to lavish and pompous Italian opera. Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* is well-known, and still performed today, but he also produced vocal and instrumental pieces for masques and incidental music for dozens of stage plays in the flourishing theatrical scene of the Restoration period. Much of his incidental music was published posthumously, including the aria *Music for a While*, which appeared in 1702 in the second volume of a collection titled *Orpheus Britannicus*—its title a tribute to Purcell, the “British Orpheus.” Purcell wrote the aria for a 1792 revival of the play *Oedipus* by John Dryden and Nathaniel Lee. *Oedipus*, based loosely upon the Sophocles tragedy, included some spectacular staging effects, and Purcell's music was an integral part of these scenes. *Music for a While*, originally divided among several singers, appeared in the opening of Act III, a scene where the soothsayer Tiresias summons a pack of ghosts from Hell, including the ghost of Oedipus's father, the murdered Laius. (Alecto, who is mentioned in the aria, is a terrifying Fury who, like Medusa, has snakes for hair.) The ghosts are commanded to stay still and listen to an aria that testifies to music's power to “all your cares beguile.” The aria is built over a ground bass—an ominous repeating figure that supports the vocal line throughout. Purcell includes some dramatic word-painting: winding, chromatic music representing the ghosts' “eternal bands” and a vivid picture of the snakes dropping from Alecto's head!

Florence Price (1887-1953), *Suite No.1 for Organ*

Though it is not clear if she had had any formal training on organ while in Little Rock, Florence Price studied organ at the New England Conservatory, and played frequently in Boston as an organ accompanist and soloist. After graduation, she briefly worked as a church organist at the Unitarian Church in Nantick, Massachusetts, but it is unclear whether or not she ever had a regular church position after this. However, after moving to Chicago in 1927, Price studied in the American Conservatory of Music's newly-established school of Theatre Orchestra Playing, and worked frequently as a theatre organist for the next few years. She was part of the Chicago Club of Women Organists, and she frequently performed at the club's concerts, often presenting her own music. The premiere of her *Suite No.1* was likely at one of these programs, on April 6, 1942, at Chicago's Grace Episcopal Church. Like most of her nearly two dozen works for organ, the *Suite No.1* was never published during her lifetime, and appeared in print only in 1993. One of her largest organ works, it is set in four movements. The *Fantasy* opens with a blues-flavored flourish, heard several times, between sometimes startlingly chromatic passages. Though she does not directly quote any spiritual tunes in the last three movements, many of Price's melodies sound very much like spirituals. This is clearly the case with the subject of the second movement, *Fughetta*. The

Air's relaxed theme, played above a chromatic accompaniment, resembles a traditional spiritual "sorrow song." The closing movement, *Toccato*, is tied together by repeated statements of a dancelike "jubilee"-style main theme that alternates with other equally lively ideas.

George Gershwin (1897-1936), *Our Love Is Here To Stay*

Many of the songs of George Gershwin, written for Broadway and the movies, have become "standards" of American popular song. We end with one of them, *Our Love Is Here To Stay*. Gershwin's witty and expressive music often provided a counterpoint to the equally witty and expressive lyrics of his brother Ira. *Our Love Is Here To Stay* was actually their very last collaboration, though sadly it was a posthumous one. George completed the chorus of the song shortly before his death on July 11, 1937. Ira later wrote lyrics, and with the help of their friend Oscar Levant, reconstructed the introductory verse. *Our Love Is Here To Stay* appeared in the largely-forgotten 1938 movie musical *The Goldwyn Follies*, but then reappeared as the title music for the classic *An American in Paris* (1951).

Wallace Willis (ca.1820-1880), *Steal Away* (arr. Harry T. Burleigh)

Many spirituals are anonymous, but *Steal Away* is credited to Wallace Willis, a biracial (Black/Choctaw) musician born into slavery in Mississippi. Willis's owner, Britt Willis, was also half Choctaw, and was forced to leave Mississippi by Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830. Britt Willis and some 300 of his slaves walked the infamous "Trail of Tears" to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Wallace Willis remained in enslavement until Emancipation, working in Britt Willis's cotton fields, until shortly before the Civil War, when Wallace and his wife were sent to work at the Spencer Academy, an Indian (and later freedmen) school. They remained at the school in the years after the Civil War. The Spencer Academy's supervisor, Alexander Reid, heard a performance of spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1871, and sent them a few of Willis's songs, including *Steal Away* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. The Jubilee Singers immediately made them part of their repertoire, and popularized them on their tours of the United States and Europe. Like many spirituals, *Steal Away* is about hope for redemption after death, but also had coded meanings: "stealing away" out of sight of slaveowners for religious and other meetings, or even escaping to freedom by way of the Underground Railroad.

Thomas A. Dorsey (1899-1993), *Precious Lord, Take My Hand* (arr. Greg Zelek and Reginald Mobley)

Known as the “Father of Gospel Music,” Thomas A. Dorsey started his career in the early 1920s as a Blues pianist and composer, working the name of Georgia Tom. Dorsey experienced a religious revival in 1928 after a long period of deep depression. Though he continued to work as a Blues musician, he also began to write religious songs that blended Blues with the spiritual and other Black traditions—the style eventually known as Black Gospel. This music was controversial in some quarters: for many churchgoing people, the Blues was the “Devil’s Music” and had no place in church. However, the new style caught on quickly and in the 1930s became the dominant form of music in the Black church. Dorsey was hired as music director at Chicago’s Pilgrim Baptist Church in 1930, a position he held for 50 years. By 1932, Dorsey had set the Blues aside and devoted all of his time to the church and to Gospel music. He founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, which was devoted to spreading and teaching the new style. Dorsey’s best-known Gospel song, *Precious Lord, Take my Hand*, was written in 1932, when he was devastated by the deaths of his wife Nettie, who died in childbirth, and of their infant son a day later. The song, an emotional cry for comfort in a time of grief and loss, remains a standard at funerals today.