Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
November 17-18-19, 2023
98th Season / Subscription Program 3
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Our November program opens with a bright work by Mozart, his "Haffner" Symphony. We then welcome back pianist Jonathan Biss, who previously appeared with the Madison Symphony Orchestra in 2010, playing Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 9*. Here, he plays a romantic masterwork, Schumann's *Piano Concerto*. After intermission we present William Levi Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*, a 1934 work that uses spirituals and other Black styles as part of a musical reflection upon the history of African Americans.

This work, the first symphony Mozart completed after moving to Vienna in 1781, is brilliant and celebratory in tone.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Born: January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.
Died: December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

Symphony No. 35 in D Major, K. 385, "Haffner"

- **Composed**: Composed in July and August of 1782; revised in March 1783.
- **Premiere**: The composer conducted the first performance at the Burgtheater in Vienna on March 23, 1783.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: 1962, 1976, and 2000.
- **Duration**: 23:00.

Background

The symphony was initially a six-movement serenade, written in honor of Siegmund Haffner, a Mozart family friend in Salzburg. Mozart composed this work at lightning speed—in less than four weeks—in part to pacify his demanding father.

In July of 1782, Mozart was at a very busy point in his career, and making a mark in Vienna, his newly-adopted home town. He had just completed a successful German *Singspiel*, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, and had several other projects on the front burner, when his father wrote from Salzburg with a request for a new work. Leopold Mozart noted that a friend, Siegmund Haffner, was being raised to the nobility, and that Wolfgang should provide an appropriately impressive new

piece for the occasion. Six years earlier, Mozart had composed an eight-movement serenade to celebrate a Haffner family wedding (K.250), and Leopold clearly had something similar in mind. On July 20, he wrote back to his father:

> "I am up to my ears in work. By a week from Sunday, I must arrange my opera for wind instruments, or someone else will do it and secure the profits instead of me. And now you ask for a new symphony, too! How on earth can I do that? ...well, I will have to stay up all night, for that is the only way; for you, dearest father, I will make the sacrifice. You may rely on having something from me in each mail delivery."

True to his word, he mailed the opening *Allegro* a week later, but soon fell behind. A few days later, he wrote to his father: "One cannot do the impossible! I won't scribble inferior stuff—so I cannot send the whole symphony until next mail day." He actually had some non-musical concerns at that moment: his romance with Constanze Weber. He and Constanze were married on August 4. Leopold strongly disapproved of this marriage, and perhaps to mollify his father, Wolfgang was able to get five more movements in the mail by August 7. (Honeymoons were short in those days...) Whether or not the music arrived in time to be played at Haffner's ennoblement is not known.

Five months later, Mozart was involved in arrangements for an "academy" to be held at the Burgtheater in March. In early January, wrote to his father, asking for the score for the serenade he had composed for Haffner. It actually took several letters of increasing desperation, but eventually Leopold returned the music. On February 15, Mozart wrote back to Salzburg: "Most heartfelt thanks for the music you have sent me...my new Haffner symphony has positively amazed me, for I had forgotten every single note of it. It must surely produce a good effect." He reworked the serenade into a symphony to fit Viennese tastes: abandoning an introductory march (K.385a) and a second minuet (now lost), and adding pairs of flutes and clarinets to the outer movements. The academy on March 23 was a great success, playing to a packed house, and turning a handsome profit for Mozart. The first three movements of the symphony were played at the beginning of the concert, and the fourth appeared at the end, framing a program of piano and instrumental works (including the newly-written *Piano Concerto No.13*), and vocal solos.

What You'll Hear

The symphony is laid out in four movements:
• A brisk opening is sonata form.
• A calm slow movement.
• A rough-edged minuet with a contrasting central trio.
• A fast-paced finale that references a melody from his recently-completed opera *The Abduction from the Seraglio.*

The symphony begins with D Major fanfares from the brass: a reflection of this work's original ceremonial intent. (Mozart apparently chose D Major because it was his father's favorite key.) This opening movement (*Allegro con spirito*) might begin in this rather festive way, but it is not just a noisy celebratory piece: throughout the movement, there are constant turns to the minor and quirky modulations that give this music a surprisingly unsettled tone.

The two middle movements were clearly intended for the courtly world of Salzburg, and sound very much like pieces from his earlier serenades. The lovely *Andante*—the longest movement in the work—is a lightly-scored series of beautiful melodies which are embellished and decorated throughout. The *Minuet* that follows is perhaps a bit more rough-edged than courtly. The outer sections sound much like Haydn, with a bit of peasant-dance influence, but the central trio has a more lilting quality.

The finale (*Presto*) contains an interesting melodic reference: the main theme presented in the first couple of measures seems to have been based on Osmin's final aria *Ha! Wie will ich triumphieren!* from *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Here, Osmin (the bad guy) is singing "Ha! How I will rejoice when they lead you to the scaffold, and put the rope around your neck!" Whether Mozart was simply reusing a good tune, or had some darker reference in mind (maybe thumbing his nose at the Salzburg nobility, or Leopold?) is unknown. The mood of this movement is mostly joyful, though as in the opening movement, there are several surprising turns to the minor.

Schumann's *Piano Concerto* is one of the leading romantic solo works for piano, balancing virtuosity and intense thematic development.

Robert Schumann
Born: June 8, 1810, Zwickau, Germany.
Died: July 29, 1856, Endenich (Bonn), Germany.

Concerto in A Minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 54

- **Composed**: 1833-1845.
- **Premiere**: December 5, 1845, in Dresden. The soloist was Clara Schumann, and it was conducted by Ferdinand Hiller, to whom the score is dedicated.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: 1975 (Rudolf Firkusny), 1999 (Jon Kimura Parker), and 2011 (Christopher Taylor).
- **Duration**: 31:00.

Background

Schumann wrote this work for his wife, Clara Schumann, a composer in her own right and one of the most prominent touring virtuosos of the period. She made the concerto a centerpiece of her repertoire and her many performances over the next 40 years helped to popularize it across Europe.

Though he was a composer who was absolutely in love with the piano, and a man married to one of the great virtuosos of the age, Schumann was notoriously unsuccessful at producing piano concertos. There are at least three early concertos, which were sketched when he was in his twenties, but left incomplete. There are also a couple of fine single-movement works for piano and orchestra from late in his career, the *Konzertstück* (1850) and the *Introduction and Allegro* (1853). He only completed one concerto, however, the A minor concerto of 1845...but it is a really good one!

Sketches for the concerto date from as early as 1833, but the impetus for completing it seems to have been Schumann's marriage to Clara Wieck at the end of 1840. Their relationship had begun when Clara was only a teenager, and the wedding was delayed for years by her father. Clara was just beginning a career as a piano soloist, and Robert had long planned to write a concerto for her. In 1838, he wrote to her from Vienna about this work: "My concerto is a compromise between a symphony, a concerto, and a huge sonata. I now see that cannot write a concerto for the virtuosos—I must plan something else." That "something else" was a single-movement work titled *Phantasie* that was a departure from the flashy but sometimes empty virtuoso pieces that were the mainstay of 19th century pianists. It is a gentle and thoroughly Romantic piece that focuses on thematic development rather than showy fireworks. He completed this work in 1841, and Clara played it during a rehearsal of Robert's *"Spring" Symphony* on August 13. He would eventually adapt the *Phantasie* as the first movement of a three-movement concerto. He completed the *Intermezzo* and the finale in the summer of 1845. On July 31, Clara wrote in her diary: "Robert has finished his concerto, and handed it

over to the copyist. I am happy as a king at the thought of playing it with an orchestra." The new concerto was very successful in its Desden premiere, and Clara quickly repeated in Leipzig and Vienna. It became the cornerstone of Clara Schumann's solo repertoire, and was popularized by her many performances over the next 40 years.

What You'll Hear

The concerto is in three movements:
• A lengthy movement that focuses on the development of a single theme.
• A songlike *Intermezzo*. Near the end, a reference to the opening movement's main theme leads directly into the third movement.
• A bright finale. Like the opening, this is set in sonata form, but here Schumann spins out several ideas.

The opening movement (*Allegro affetuoso*) begins with a furious burst of piano chords, but soon settles into a gentler character, with an oboe theme that is soon picked up by the soloist. The movement is set in sonata form, but nearly all of the important thematic material is derived from this opening theme. The piano dominates, but there are several nice bits of orchestral writing as the soloist plays against solo woodwind passages. After a development that focusses on the primary theme, and a shortened recapitulation, the end of the movement features the soloist in a finely-drawn cadenza, and a shift to march character.

The lovely *Intermezzo* (*Andantino grazioso*) is a romantic song, set in a three-part form. The playful opening motive—four notes passed between piano and orchestra—is subtly crafted from the first movement's main melody. The central passage, carried by the low strings, is more lyrical and sustained. After a short development, and a return of the opening material, Schumann brings back a fragment of the first movement theme to lead directly into the final movement (*Allegro vivace*), whose main melody is based upon the same material. This movement is also set in sonata form, but where the opening movement focused intensely upon a single melodic idea, here the composer seems to have given his imagination free reign, as a whole series of distinct melodies spring forth in the exposition. The development begins with a wonderful string *fugato*, which is soon overlaid by yet another new theme. The movement comes to close with a lengthy coda—not a crashing conclusion, but a calm and continued development that is virtuosic while retaining a light touch to the end.

Dawson's symphony brings together a host of Black musical styles, most importantly the spiritual, in a profound reflection on African American history.

William Levi Dawson
Born: September 26, 1899, Anniston, Alabama.
Died: May 2, 1990, Montgomery, Alabama.

Negro Folk Symphony

- **Composed**: Completed 1934, revised 1952.
- **Premiere**: November 20, 1934, at Carnegie Hall in New York City, by the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Leopold Stokowski.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration**: 29:00.

Background

The *Negro Folk Symphony*, Dawson's only orchestral work, had a very high-profile premiere in 1934, but remained relatively obscure until the last few decades, when it has been rediscovered by a new generation of musicians and listeners.

William Levi Dawson was one of the most talented African American composers in a generation that included Harry T. Burleigh, William Grant Still, Florence Price, Ulysses Kay, and others. He was born in Alabama, and at age 15, left for Tennessee to study at the famed Tuskeegee Institute (now Tuskeegee University). After his graduation, he taught public school music in Kansas and gigged as a jazz trombonist, while also earning a music degree at Kansas City's Horner Institute of Fine Arts. Dawson spent the late 1920s in Chicago, pursuing additional studies at the Chicago Musical College and the American Conservatory of Music, while also leading a church choir and performing on trombone. (He appeared with Louis Armstrong and other notable jazz musicians, while also playing principal trombone in the Chicago Civic Orchestra!) In 1931, he accepted an invitation to return to Tuskegee as a professor. He would teach there until 1956, and built the Tuskeegee Choir into an internationally-recognized ensemble. Following his retirement, Dawson toured extensively as a guest conductor.

For Dawson and many of his Black contemporaries, the spiritual was a wellspring of inspiration. Many of these traditional religious songs—both "sorrow songs" and "jubilees"—dated from the days of slavery, and the no less turbulent late 19th century. Dawson was involved with spirituals throughout his life, arranging and publishing dozens of them for chorus. Spirituals were also the foundation for his

only orchestral work, the *Negro Folk Symphony*. As he explained in his program notes for its premiere: "In this composition, the composer has employed three themes taken from typical melodies over which he has brooded since childhood, having learned them at his mother's knee." Earlier that year, Dawson showed the score to the conductor Leopold Stokowski, who suggested a few changes and programmed the symphony on four concerts performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra that November in Carnegie Hall. Despite an enthusiastic response from both audiences and critics, the *Negro Folk Symphony* remained largely forgotten after this. In 1952, following a trip to West Africa, Dawson revised the work, particularly the first movement, to incorporate African musical elements, rhythm, and instruments. Stokowski finally recorded the work, in this new version, with the American Symphony Orchestra in 1963. Like the works of Florence Price (whose third symphony we played in May), there has been renewed interest in the *Negro Folk Symphony* in recent years.

What You'll Hear

The symphony is set in three movements, each of which has a programmatic meaning:

- A movement in traditional sonata form that quotes a spiritual and refers to several Black styles.
- A slow movement dominated by a solemn lament: a remembrance of the time of slavery.
- An outwardly playful finale based upon a pair of spirituals, though also music with constant hints of darker emotion.

The symphony is in three movements beginning with *The Bond of Africa*, representing the "missing link from a human chain when the first African was taken from the shores of his native land and sent into slavery." Dawson clearly channels Black musical idioms throughout, beginning with the bluesy horn and English horn solos at the opening. (This phrase—the "missing link"—reappears in the movement as a kind of lament.) A theme introduced by the oboes is the spiritual *Oh, m' Lit'l' Soul Gwine-A Shine*. The movement continues in an energetic classical form, with a series of themes introduced and developed. However, there is an overlay of references to Black styles ranging from the *juba* dance, banjo songs, and African rhythms to contemporary Jazz and Blues.

According to Dawson, *Hope in the Night* represents "the humdrum life of a people whose bodies were baked by the sun and lashed with the whip for two hundred and fifty years; whose lives were proscribed before they were born." This is desolate

music beginning with a tolling gong and a plodding background to a lament. This idea alternates with livelier and more hopeful music.

The main theme of the final movement is the spiritual that Dawson uses as its title, *O, Le' Me Shine, Shine Like a Morning Star!* This emerges playfully in the opening section. He also incorporates *Hallelujah, Lord, I Been Down Into the Sea*. Though the overall effect of this movement is lively and upbeat, there are hints of darkness intruding throughout. This is in keeping with Dawson's note that it depicts "the merry play of children yet unaware of the hopelessness beclouding their future."

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Complete program notes for the 2023-24 season are available at www.madisonsymphony.org.