

Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
September 22-23-24, 2023
98th Season / Subscription Program 1
J. Michael Allsen

Our opening concert brings together music from four American composers, opening with a suite from Copland's great ballet score *Appalachian Spring*. Pianist Terrence Wilson then joins the Madison Symphony Orchestra for *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin's successful fusion of Jazz style and Classical form. Maestro DeMain (celebrating his 30th season with the MSO!) has described *The Chairman Dances* as a "prequel" to John Adams's 1986 opera *Nixon in China*. In *The Chairman Dances*, Adams portrays the characters of Chairman Mao and his former wife with an eclectic blend of minimalism and other styles. The program ends with the deeply satisfying second symphony of Howard Hanson.

One of the defining American works of the 20th century, *Appalachian Spring* is the last of Copland's great trilogy of "American" ballets, following *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942).

Aaron Copland

Born: November 14, 1900, Brooklyn, New York.

Died: December 2, 1990, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

Suite from "Appalachian Spring"

- **Composed:** 1943-44. The orchestral suite heard at these concerts was written in 1945, and premiered that year by the New York Philharmonic.
- **Premiere:** October 30, 1944, Washington, DC.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** *Appalachian Spring*—or excerpts from it—has been played many times by the MSO, beginning in 1964. Our most recent performance of the complete suite at these concerts was in September 2013.
- **Duration:** 25:00.

"It is essentially the coming of a new life. It has to do with growing things. Spring is the loveliest and saddest time of the year." - Martha Graham

Background

The ballet, created by choreographer Martha Graham, is set on the early 19th century American frontier. It centers on the marriage of a young couple and the community that surrounds them.

Appalachian Spring was created in response to a 1942 commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation of the Library of Congress, for a new ballet by the Martha Graham dance company. Graham, who knew Copland's earlier ballet scores *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*, asked him to provide a score for this new ballet, which was also to be on an American theme. The result, which Copland titled simply *Ballet for Martha*, is one of the landmark works of American twentieth-century music, and reflects a new, sometimes austere, but more accessible style Copland adopted in the late 1930s. (The title *Appalachian Spring* was applied by Graham, who took it from a poem by Hart Crane.) The original version of the score, written for a small group of woodwinds, strings and piano, won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for music, and Copland quickly produced two more versions of the score in 1945: a suite for full orchestra, and a complete ballet score for full orchestra.

The scenario for Graham's ballet centers around a young pioneer couple who are about to be married in early 19th-century Pennsylvania, and around their newly-built homestead. The couple receives visits and advice from neighbors and a revivalist preacher, and are finally left alone to their new lives and home. Copland's music is optimistic and evocative, calling up images of strength, courage, and religious faith from the American frontier. His earlier ballets had used folk songs to create an American quality, but nearly all of the melodic material in *Appalachian Spring* is Copland's own—only at the climactic point of the ballet does he introduce folk material in the guise of an old Shaker melody.

What You'll Hear

Copland's score was the perfect accompaniment to Graham's scenario. The spare, unadorned music of the opening conveys a sense of boundless space on the frontier, and the music that follows the action of the ballet represents the dignified simplicity of its characters. At the end, Copland's stirring "Shaker Variations" lead into the quiet conclusion.

The *Appalachian Spring Suite* is cast in eight sections, which are played without pauses. In his notes to the first performance of the suite in 1945, Copland gave the following description:

- “1. Very slowly. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.
 2. Fast. Sudden burst of A Major arpeggios to start the action. A sentiment both elated and religious is the keynote to this scene.
 3. Moderate. Duo for the Bride and her Intended—scene of tenderness and passion.
 4. Quite fast. The Revivalist and his flock. Folksy feelings—suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.
 5. Still faster. Solo dance of the Bride—presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear.
 6. Very slowly (as at first). Transition scene to music reminiscent of the introduction.
 7. Calm and flowing. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer-Husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme. The theme, sung by a solo clarinet, was taken from a collection of Shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and published under the title *The Gift to be Simple*. The melody I borrowed and used almost literally is called ‘Simple Gifts’. It has this text:
 ‘Tis the gift to be simple,
 ‘Tis the gift to be free,
 ‘Tis the gift to come down
 Where we ought to be.
 8. Moderate. Coda. The Bride takes her place among her neighbors. At the end, the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house. Muted strings intone a hushed, prayer-like passage. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.”

Gershwin’s 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue* was his first great success in fusing Jazz style and Classical form and scoring.

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898, New York City, New York.

Died: July 11, 1937, Los Angeles, California.

Rhapsody in Blue

- **Composed:** January and February, 1924.
- **Premiere:** Gershwin was the piano soloist with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in the premiere, in New York City on February 12, 1924.

- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1929 (Sigfrid Prager), 1963 (Arthur Becknell) 2002 (Leon Bates), 2010 (Joel Weng, at the *Final Forte* competition), and 2012 (Martina Filjak).
- **Duration:** 16:00.

Background

In early 1924, Gershwin found that a casual conversation with bandleader Paul Whiteman about a “Jazz concerto” had suddenly become a public commitment: to write a large-scale work for piano and orchestra...in the space of a month! The result, *Rhapsody in Blue*, was a phenomenal success.

By 1924, Gershwin was a huge success on Broadway, and well-regarded as a pianist. It was at this time that Paul Whiteman conceived one of the most ambitious concerts of the Roaring ‘20s. Whiteman, the self-styled “King of Jazz,” announced an “Experiment in Modern Music” for February 12, 1924, a concert that would supposedly answer the question “What is American Music?” Whiteman planned to bring together Jazz of all styles with Classical music, and newly-composed works by composers such as Irving Berlin and Victor Herbert. Whiteman and Gershwin had casually chatted about a large-scale Jazz-style orchestral work for the Whiteman Orchestra. But this casual commitment became a *fait accompli* when Gershwin read the *New York Herald’s* January 3 announcement that he was “already at work” composing a “Jazz concerto” for Whiteman’s grand concert! Composing a concerto in just over a month was a daunting task for a composer who had never written a work of this scale, and he already had several heavy Broadway commitments. Rather than attempting a traditional concerto, Gershwin settled on a “rhapsody”—a much less rigorous form that would allow him to develop musical ideas freely. According to a letter by Gershwin, the final inspiration for the score came during a train trip to Boston for the opening of his show *Sweet Little Devil*:

“It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattley-bang that is often stimulating to a composer—I frequently hear music in the heart of noise—I suddenly heard—and even saw on paper—the complete construction of the rhapsody from beginning to end. No new themes came to me, but I worked on the thematic material already in my mind, and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston, I had a definite *plot* of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance.”

Given Gershwin's relative inexperience in writing for orchestra, and the short lead time available, much of the orchestration was done by Whiteman's staff arranger, Ferde Grofé. In the end, Whiteman's pretentious and over-long "Experiment" was a qualified success. However, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*—the 24th work on a program of 25 pieces—stole the show.

What You'll Hear

The *Rhapsody* evolves freely from one idea to another. Gershwin was a powerful pianist and wrote the virtuoso solo part for himself. He probably improvised some of the long solo passages on the spot at the first performance.

The *Rhapsody* opens with a famous clarinet *glissando*, the trademark lick of Ross Gorman, Whiteman's lead clarinetist, which Gershwin adopted as the perfect lead-in to the first theme. The piece develops freely, with one theme flowing naturally into the next, and with increasing intensity, until the piano takes a long solo and slows the tempo. The central section is based upon a romantic melody that sounds like a nod to Tchaikovsky with a bit of jazz punctuation. There is a recapitulation, and the piece ends aggressively, with the solo piano playing its loudest.

[**MSO historical note:** In February 1929, only five years after its premiere, the orchestra's first conductor, Sigfrid Prager, programmed the *Rhapsody* in Madison. Prager played the solo piano part, and local musician Richard Church conducted. Prager was apparently nervous enough about the audience reaction to such a "controversial" new work that he published an article a few days before the concert in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, explaining the *Rhapsody* and asking the audience to approach it with an "open mind." He needn't have worried: the audience loved it, and Prager repeated the work "by popular demand" at a concert in May! - M.A.]

The Chairman Dances is an orchestral work related to Adams's 1986 opera *Nixon in China*.

John Adams

Born: February 15, 1947, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The Chairman Dances (Foxtrot for Orchestra)

- **Composed:** *The Chairman Dances*, composed in 1985, is an orchestral work related to Adams's opera *Nixon in China*.
- **Premiere:** This piece was performed before the opera as whole was complete: it was premiered by the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra on

January 31, 1986. (The opera was first performed in October 1987 by the Houston Grand Opera: a production conducted by John DeMain.)

- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1989 and 1998.
- **Duration:** 13:00.

“The myths of our time are not Cupid and Psyche, or Orpheus, or Ulysses, but characters like Mao and Nixon.” - John Adams

Background

Nixon in China was an opera based on the events of President Nixon’s 1972 visit to China. The *Chairman Dances* accompanied a scene cut from the final version of Act III, a banquet on the final night of the visit.

Richard Nixon’s 1972 trip to China was the greatest diplomatic coup of his presidency. The staunchly anti-Communist Nixon surprised the world by visiting a then-closed and isolated China, and meeting both with Premier Zhou Enlai and Chairman Mao. Though the actual results of the visit were limited, it was a powerfully symbolic opening in what had been a hostile relationship. Some 15 years later, John Adams wrote *Nixon in China*—his first full-length opera—on the events of the three-day presidential visit to Peking.

Adams is one of several composers whose music is frequently characterized—sometimes misleadingly—as “minimalist.” This style, pioneered in the 1960s and 1970s by composers such as Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, LaMonte Young, and Adams, featured constant repetition, and simple musical changes that are carried out gradually over a long period of time. In the last 40 years, Reich, Glass, and Adams have all moved far beyond the original minimalist style, and by the mid 1980s, when he wrote *Nixon in China*, Adams was already working with an eclectic range of styles and techniques. *Nixon in China*, which Adams described as a “docu-opera,” was a three-year collaboration with director Peter Sellars, and librettist Alice Goodman. It is notable for its intense character development, and for its innovative use of operatic conventions. *The Chairman Dances* was premiered while the rest of the opera was still in progress.

What You’ll Hear

The work begins with persistently pulsing music, which gradually evolves, giving way to a more lush style, and eventually to a foxtrot. The original rhythmic energy returns—now with a lyrical overlay—before the piece winds quietly to close.

Adams describes its composition as follows:

“*The Chairman Dances* was an ‘out-take’ of Act III of *Nixon in China*. Neither an ‘excerpt’ nor a ‘fantasy on themes from,’ it was in fact a kind of warmup for embarking on the creation of the full opera. At the time, 1985, I was obliged to fulfill a long-delayed commission for the Milwaukee Symphony, but having already seen the scenario to Act III of *Nixon in China*, I couldn’t wait to begin work on that piece. So *The Chairman Dances* began as a ‘foxtrot’ for Chairman Mao and his bride, Chiang Ch’ing, the fabled ‘Madame Mao,’ firebrand, revolutionary executioner, architect of China’s calamitous Cultural Revolution, and (a fact not universally realized) a former Shanghai movie actress.”

This music was initially intended for the final scene of the opera, a formal banquet for the Nixons, hosted by Mao, who looks down from an enormous portrait. Though this scene did not appear in the final version, Adams describes the action:

“Chiang Ch’ing, a.k.a. Madame Mao, has gatecrashed the Presidential Banquet. She is first seen standing where she is most in the way of the waiters. After a few minutes, she brings out a box of paper lanterns and hangs them around the hall, then strips down to a *cheongsam*, skin-tight from neck to ankle and slit up the hip. She signals the orchestra to play and begins dancing by herself. Mao is becoming excited. He steps down from his portrait on the wall, and they begin to foxtrot together. They are back in Yenan, dancing to the gramophone...”

According to Adams, the final act is about love and aging. In its final state, Mao, Chiang Ch’ing, and the Nixons reminisce about the simpler days gone by: the Nixons about the early days of their marriage and his tour of duty in World War II, and the Maos about the months before the Revolution, when they spent quiet times together in the caves at Yenan. These reminiscences are treated with humor in *The Chairman Dances*—as in the chugging opening music associated with Mao or Chiang Ch’ing’s more seductive dance. But the end result is sweet and melancholy.

As a successful composer, and as the longtime director of the famed Eastman School of Music, Howard Hanson was one of the leading American musicians of the middle 20th century. His fine “*Romantic*” *Symphony* remains his most popular work today.

Howard Hanson

Born: October 28, 1896, Wahoo, Nebraska.

Died: February 26, 1981, Rochester, New York.

Symphony No. 2, Op. 30, "Romantic"

- **Composed:** 1930.
- **Premiere:** November 28, 1930, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, under Serge Koussevitsky.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 1955.
- **Duration:** 29:00.

Background

The symphony was commissioned by Hanson's friend, Serge Koussevitsky, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Born into a Swedish immigrant family in Wahoo, Nebraska, Howard Hanson would become one of the most influential American musicians of the 20th century. After studies with the great American composition teacher Percy Goetschius at Northwestern University, Hanson spent the early 1920s in Rome, studying with Ottorino Respighi. He returned to the United States in 1924, and was appointed director of the Eastman School of Music, a position he held for four decades. Under Hanson's leadership, the Eastman School became one of America's leading conservatories, and he helped to train a whole generation of younger American musicians and composers. Both as a leader in several arts groups (including the Music Teachers National Organization) and as leading American conductor, he championed contemporary works by American composers. Hanson's own musical style has generally been labeled "neo-Romantic" and his works, particularly the symphonies, were clearly influenced by the music of Sibelius and Grieg.

He had a long association with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and its music director, Serge Koussevitsky, and when the BSO celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1930-31, Hanson was one of several leading composers from whom Koussevitsky commissioned works. The premiere of Hanson's *Symphony No. 2*, was a success, and it has proved to be the most enduringly popular of his seven symphonies. Hanson gave it the subtitle "Romantic," and this is a piece that clearly looks back to the 19th century in its sentiment and sweeping melodies. It is also composed in the mold of Sibelius and Brahms, with development of a few themes across its three movements.

What You'll Hear

The work is laid out in three movements:

- An opening movement, with a slow introduction, and a faster main section that features two distinctly contrasting ideas.
- A tender second movement, with a lovely main theme from the flutes.
- A finale which brings back the themes of the first movement and ends in an exciting coda.

The opening movement begins with a rather mysterious introduction (*Adagio*) that quickly builds to a peak of intensity, and just as quickly dies away. The aggressive main theme (*Allegro*) is carried by the brass, and mood is gradually calmed by tender oboe and horn solos. The strings introduce a lyrical second theme below a horn countermelody. In place of a development, there is a luscious bit of chamber music for solo woodwinds and horn. Tension increases gradually until a varied recapitulation of the two main ideas. The movement closes quietly, in the mood of the second theme.

The two concluding movements are much more compact. The second movement (*Andante con tenderezza*) begins with a gentle theme played by the flutes. An extended interlude recalls the foreboding mood of the first movement's introduction, but this soon gives way to an exultant horn theme. The movement closes with a reprise of the opening music.

The whole point of the finale (*Allegro con brio*) seems to be to work its way towards a restatement of the main ideas of the opening movement, bringing the symphony's thematic development full circle. It begins with nervous energy—flickering woodwinds and brass fanfares that clearly show the influence of his study with Respighi. A quieter interlude leads to an insistent pulsing from the strings and a series of increasingly intense brass fanfares. The opening movement's main theme finally reappears. Hanson then proceeds to the second theme of the opening movement, now transformed into something bold and triumphant. He breaks this mood briefly with a short woodwind interlude, but then concludes the movement with a grand, brassy coda.