

Rockford Symphony Orchestra
Steven Larsen, Music Director

ComEd Classics Series

“American Visions”

March 31, 2007
8:00 PM

John Harbison

Remembering Gatsby, Foxtrot for Orchestra

Frank Proto

Carmen Fantasy for Double Bass and Orchestra

Alison Gaines, double bass

Burrill Phillips

Selections from McGuffey’s Reader

The One Horse Shay

John Alden and Priscilla

The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere

INTERMISSION

Aaron Copland

Suite from the opera, *The Tenderland*

George Gershwin

arr. Robert Russell Bennett

Porgy and Bess, a Symphonic Picture

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Tonight’s performance will be broadcast by WNIU/105.7 on April 16, 2007.

Program Notes

By Steven Larsen

***Remembering Gatsby*, Foxtrot for Orchestra**

John Harbison (b. Orange, New Jersey, 1938)

Remembering Gatsby would logically seem to be an extraction from Harbison’s 1999 opera, *The Great Gatsby*. However, this “foxtrot for orchestra” not only predates the

opera, it was actually written six years before its formal commissioning by the Metropolitan Opera.

Harbison began sketching an opera based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel in 1984, but lost momentum when the author's estate ignored his attempts to obtain rights. The next year Robert Shaw commissioned him to write a work for the Atlanta Symphony. Harbison recalls going through the unused sketches and finding musical images that seemed to bring the era to life.

The ballroom dance style known as the foxtrot was only eight years old at the time the fictional Nick Carraway moved to West Egg, Long Island and encountered the mysterious Jay Gatsby. Supposedly invented by Harry Fox in 1914 as an easier version of the two-step, the foxtrot caught on quickly. Popularized by films like *Fox Trot Finesse* and *Fox Trot Craze* (both from 1915), Ziegfeld revues like *Push and Go* (1914) and countless sheet music titles hammered out in Tin Pan Alley, it offers a better (and less stereotyped) glimpse into 1920's America than more notorious dances like the Charleston or the Lindy.

The composer offers these notes about the work:

“The piece, which runs about eight minutes, begins with a *cantabile* passage for full orchestra, a representation of Gatsby's vision of the green light on Daisy's dock. Then the foxtrot begins, first with a kind of call to order, then a twenties tune I had written for one of the party scenes, played by a *concertino* led by soprano saxophone. The tune is then varied and broken into its components, leading to an altered reprise of the call to order, and an intensification of the original *cantabile*. A brief coda combines some of the motives and refers fleetingly to the telephone bell and the automobile horns, instruments of Gatsby's fate. My father, eventually a Reformation historian, was a young show-tune composer in the twenties, and this piece may also have been a chance to see him in his tuxedo again.”

John Harbison studied composition at Harvard and Princeton Universities with Walter Piston, Roger Sessions and Earl Kim, with further studies in Berlin with Boris Blacher. He has received many awards and fellowships, including those from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, BMI, the Kennedy Center and the Guggenheim Foundation. His 1987 cantata, *The Flight into Egypt*, won a Pulitzer Prize. An active and accomplished conductor, Harbison also performs as a jazz pianist and chamber music violist. Currently he is Professor of Music at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and, with his violinist wife, leads a chamber music festival at his home in Token Creek, Wisconsin.

Suite from the opera, *The Tenderland*

Aaron Copland (b. Brooklyn, 1900; d. North Tarrytown, New York, 1990)

By the mid-20th century American composers had found their voice and asserted themselves as worthy contributors to the world's concert halls. Particularly vibrant was

the genre of musical theater, the successor to the European operetta that, in the hands of Gershwin, Porter, Kern, Cowan, Berlin, Lerner and Lowe and Rodgers and Hammerstein had become a virtual industry unto itself.

Conspicuous by its absence was “The Great American Opera.” Many hopefuls received much-ballyhooed premieres, only to sink out of sight after a short run. The only viable candidate for the title was Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*; however, it uncomfortably straddled a gap between “high” and “popular” art, and not until 1985 would it reach the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. America, to the Europeans, was *das Land ohne Oper* (the Land without Opera).

In 1954, the two greatest names in American musical theater, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, set about to create the Great American Opera – not by writing it themselves, but by commissioning Aaron Copland to do so on behalf of the League of Composers. Copland was not only America’s most famous composer; his works such as *Billy the Kid*, *Lincoln Portrait*, *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring* and his many songs deftly captured – no, *defined* - the spirit of “Americanness” in concert music and ballet.

Copland set his opera in the 1930s during harvest time on a Midwestern farm. The farm family was the icon of American values, but increasingly found itself uncomfortably straddling our agrarian history and our urban future. In Copland’s story, a girl’s high school graduation presents a coming of age crisis and she decides to leave the farm to pursue her life, wherever it takes her. The Great Depression had become part of America’s allegory as the country’s own coming of age in which the American character was toughened in preparation for the trials of World War II.

The intended venue was the new medium of television. In 1951, Giancarlo Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors* had become the first opera written for and premiered on television. Copland chose Erik Johns, a painter and dancer who also dabbled in theater writing, to write the libretto. Neither had written a full-length opera before, and the process was not without turmoil. In the end, NBC rejected the opera, finally titled *The Tenderland*, and only a New York City Opera production saved it from total eclipse. Over fifty years have passed, and although the opera receives occasional productions, the distinction of being the “Great American Opera” must belong to another.

Its failure was largely due to lack of compelling drama – on the other hand, much of Copland’s musical score is delightful and representative of his finest work. Copland made a concert suite of the Introduction to Act III, the love duet, the party scene from Act II, and the quintet, *The Promise of Living* that closes Act I.

A Carmen Fantasy

Frank Proto (b. Brooklyn, 1941)

Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* is not only one of the most frequently performed operas ever written, its treasure trove of melodies have inspired generations of composers to write

suites, fantasies and variations on its themes. Many virtuoso performers have written or commissioned showpieces that used Bizet's music to display their talents. Pablo de Sarasate's *Carmen Fantasy* is one of the best known.

Frank Proto was well-known for 30 years to residents of The City of the Seven Hills as the principal bass of the Cincinnati Symphony and as a prolific composer of works for pops, youth, and classical concerts. Every music director during his tenure commissioned him to feature principal players of the orchestra. Proto has also written for artists as diverse as Dave Brubeck, Eddie Daniels, Duke Ellington, Cleo Laine, Benjamin Luxon, Sherill Milnes, Gerry Mulligan, Roberta Peters, Ruggerio Ricci, Doc Severinsen, and Richard Stoltzman.

Proto grew up in Brooklyn, New York, where he studied piano and later double bass. Both Juilliard and the Manhattan School offered him scholarships; he chose Manhattan. After graduation he worked as a free-lance bassist in New York City, performing with the Symphony of the Air, American Symphony, the Robert Shaw Chorale, Princeton Chamber Orchestra, various Broadway and Off-Broadway show bands and in many of the jazz clubs that were a mainstay of New York nightlife at the time. In 1966 he joined the Cincinnati Symphony.

Proto has gone to Bizet's well four times. The first (1976) was a suite for jazz ensemble, later adapted for full orchestra. In 1985 Doc Severinsen asked him to write a suite featuring him and his own jazz band with orchestra. In 1990 Severinsen asked him for a new *Carmen Fantasy* for a recording with the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra.

The next year Proto wrote a *Carmen Fantasy* for double bass and piano as a surprise birthday present for the Syrian-French bassist François Rabbath. The two had collaborated before, and the result was a work that cast the music of Bizet in an entirely new light. Rabbath debuted the piece on a recital in 1991 with Proto at the piano, and it was so successful that the soloist asked that it be orchestrated. The orchestral version was first played by the Toulouse Chamber Orchestra in July 1992.

The music from the opera was chosen somewhat at random, with a virtuoso Prelude for the soloist leading into the *Aragonaise*, which includes an improvisational passage. "Micaela's Aria" from Act II provides a tender and lyrical slow movement that allows the somewhat ungainly instrument to show its expressive potential. The "Toreador Song" brings Proto's love for jazz into the bullring, and the Fantasy ends with a virtuoso "Bohemian Dance."

Proto stands out among today's composers because of his insistence on maintaining a close connection between performing and composing – commonplace in the past, but today found mostly in jazz and pop fields. He is also eager to use music to address thorny issues we face in contemporary society. These works include *Afro-American Fragments*, *Mingus - Live in the Underworld*, *Four Rogues*, *a Mystery for Double Bass and Piano*, *The Games of October*, *Can this be Man?*, *Ghost in Machine* and *My Name is Citizen Soldier* and *The Profanation of Hubert J. Fort*.

Currently in a long-term project to record all of his chamber music for the Red Mark label – three CDs have been released to date, with three more in various stages of production – he continues to maintain his double life as both a composer and performer.

Selections from McGuffey's Reader

Burrill Phillips (b. Omaha, 1907; d. 1988)

As the 20th century recedes in our rear view mirrors, the cultural relics of America's 19th century become even more distant. Consider *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers*, a graded six-volume set of books published between 1836 and 1857. An estimated 122 million copies were sold, and they were the principal elementary school textbooks for at least two generations of Americans in thirty-seven states. Their author, William Holmes McGuffey (1800-1873) was one of this nation's leading educators, a man with a prodigious memory (he memorized entire books of the Bible) who came to have an important influence on the tastes and attitudes on mid-19th century America.

The original inspiration for this three movement work actually had nothing to do with the book. The painting by Grant Wood called *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, according to Phillips, "had the impact of a revelation for me, in that it contained all the elements of what I had felt for a long time to be at the center of the strong old American legends. Grant Wood's painting enabled me to say in music what I took to be universal characteristics of us as a nation: a certain naive strength of moral fiber, some sentiment verging on the sentimental, love of movement, and grand gestures and attitudes. None of these are ever satirized in the music, nor is everything always serious. What humor there is derives from the situation, not from comments upon it."

Phillips' interest in the painting quite naturally led him to the famous Longfellow poem of the same name, and from there to the other poems included by McGuffey. The first, "The One Horse Shay" by O. W. Holmes, according the composer, is "a truly New England idea (combining thrift with humor). The deacon's carriage is so well-made that it lasted exactly one hundred years, and on the anniversary of its creation, it fell completely and suddenly to pieces." The second movement, a love song with no story elements, is based on Longfellow's poem about John Alden and Priscilla. In the introduction to the Paul Revere movement, the glockenspiel represents the signal lanterns hung in the Old North Church tower to warn of the coming of the British: "one if by land and two if by sea."

Born in Omaha, Nebraska on November 9, 1907, Phillips was raised in Denver and attended the Denver College of Music. Further composition studies with Howard Hanson and Bernard Rogers at the Eastman School of Music led to faculty appointments there in 1933, 1949 and 1965-66. He was Professor of Music at the University of Illinois from 1949 to 1964 and was a guest lecturer at the Juilliard School (1968-69) and Cornell University (1972-73).

Porgy and Bess, A Symphonic Picture, arr. by Robert Russell Bennett

George Gershwin (b. Brooklyn, N.Y., 1898; d. Beverly Hills, California, 1937)

Looking at works that marked the beginning and the end of George Gershwin's all-too-brief career, one is struck by an irony. His first hit was the 1919 song *Swanee*, sung by Al Jolson in blackface, part of the long and shameful tradition of minstrel shows in which white performers impersonated stereotypical black characters for the amusement of white audiences. Sixteen years later Gershwin would cap his career with his greatest work, the folk opera *Porgy and Bess*. The piece was written explicitly for a black cast and reproducing with painstaking accuracy and obvious affection the life and culture of a southern black community. Had Gershwin developed an aversion to musical racism in such a short period? Or had American society, by the mid-1930s, become more sensitive to racial issues?

Social historians can debate the latter premise, which I believe is highly doubtful. However, in the first three decades of the 20th century, American Negroes had become much more visible to white society – largely through music that was broadcast on the radio, distributed through sound recordings and featured on films. Whites with faces blackened with burnt cork lost all credibility when musicians like Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington became visible emissaries of black culture and talent.

Gershwin always felt a kinship to black musicians. He was a musical omnivore, eager to listen to and learn new styles, especially the exotic sounds of early jazz and blues that were being played in the clubs of Harlem. They also shared some common ground; Jews like Gershwin didn't have to contend with prejudice against skin color, but they were still marginalized and segregated in American society, denied access to certain schools, careers and neighborhoods, and stereotyped by anti-Semitism. The door to a career in popular music, however, stood open to both Jews and African-Americans, even if the latter were obliged to use the service entrance.

1924 and the sensational premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* brought Gershwin recognition as a "serious" composer, even though he was already well-established as a composer of songs and Broadway revues. Two years later, Gershwin read a novel titled *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward, a poet and writer from Charleston, South Carolina. Based loosely on a crippled black man named "Goat Sammy" who lived in the Catfish Row section of that city, the novel became a best-seller. Gershwin immediately saw the musical and theatrical potential of the story and wrote to Heyward, suggesting that they collaborate on turning it into an opera. The writer responded with eager enthusiasm, but at that moment his wife was busy adapting the story into a play. Plans for an opera would have to wait.

Gershwin was just hitting his stride as a composer of hit Broadway musicals, which included *Oh, Kay!*, *Strike Up the Band*, *Funny Face*, *Rosalie*, *Treasure Girl*, *Show Girl*, *Girl Crazy*, and *Of Thee I Sing*, so putting the opera on hold was no problem. Meanwhile, the Heywards' play, *Porgy*, debuted in 1927 and became a hit.

By 1932 Gershwin had enjoyed concert hall success with *An American in Paris* and the Piano Concerto in F. Confident in his abilities as never before, he asked Heyward to

revive the project. Heyward's finances had suffered badly in the first years of the Great Depression, and he was more than eager to work with the man who had become America's most prominent and successful composer. The opera was almost scuttled before a note had been written with the news that Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II were planning to write a musical version of the story, in which Al Jolson would play Porgy in blackface. Fortunately, the idea was scrapped.

Heyward began crafting a libretto for the opera, called *Porgy and Bess* in order to differentiate it from the play. George's brother, Ira, assisted in fashioning lyrics. After completing a grueling twenty-eight day, twenty-eight city concert tour, George rented a ramshackle house on a small barrier island ten miles from Charleston and totally immersed himself in the opera and the local Gullah culture. Heyward later reported that, for Gershwin it seemed not so much an exploration as a "homecoming." On one occasion Gershwin attended a local prayer meeting, where he was so excited by an energetic form of vocal music called "shouting" that he joined in, earning both the admiration and amusement of the participants for his enthusiasm.

This "working vacation" was critical in setting the authentic tone and setting of the opera, but the distractions of sun, surf and socialization left little time for composing. Returning to New York City in late July, Gershwin worked steadily for the next year, finishing the orchestration just four weeks before the opening in Boston on September 30, 1935. It was a critical and audience success, but the three-hour running time and the difficulty of Porgy's role mandated extensive revisions before its New York debut.

Ten days later it opened in New York to mixed reviews, and the show closed after 124 performances, failing to recoup its costs. By the standard applied to the Broadway musical it was a failure. However, many of the show's songs had already become staples of the popular song repertoire, keeping its name and reputation alive. A 1942 Broadway production set a record for the longest running revival up to that point. An American troupe toured the world continuously from 1952 to 1956, making history by performing at Milan's La Scala opera house in 1955 – the first opera by a native-born American to be presented at the Mecca of "serious" opera.

In 1936 Gershwin arranged popular excerpts from the opera into a suite called *Catfish Row*, but after his death many found it lacking. Fritz Reiner commissioned Robert Russell Bennett, the famed Broadway arranger to create a more substantial orchestral version, and in 1942 his *Symphonic Picture* premiered with the Pittsburgh Symphony. Bennett stayed true to Gershwin's style and orchestral colors, creating a comprehensive overview of the entire opera, leading up to the triumphant "Oh Lawd, I'm On My Way."

Program notes by Steve Larsen © 2007