ROCKFORD SYMPHONY 2007-8 Classics 6 (Apr 26)

ALFVÉN **Midsummer Vigil, Opus 19**

ANDERSON **Piano Concerto**

Allegro moderato
Andante
Allegro vivo

GERSHWIN **Rhapsody in Blue**

SHOSTAKOVICH **Jazz Suite No. 2 (Suite for Variety Orchestra No. 1)**

March
Lyric Waltz
Dance 1
Waltz 1
Little Polka
Waltz 2
Dance 2
Finale

PROGRAM NOTES
By Steven Ledbetter

HUGO ALFVÉN
Midsummer Vigil (Swedish Rhapsody No. 1)

Hugo Alfvén was born in Stockholm, Sweden, on May 1, 1872, and died in Falun on May 8, 1960. He composed his most famous work, Midsummer Vigil, *in 1903. The score calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English hor), two clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, two trnumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani and two percussionists (cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel), two harps, and strings. Duration is about 13 minutes.*

At the beginning of his career, Hugo Alfvén filled much the same role in Sweden that Elgar did in England, as a greatly gifted composer who had finally brought to his native country a pride in the creativity of one of its own. He had a distinguished career as a choral conductor (more than 50 years leading one chorus and, at the same time, more than a quarter century with the Uppsala University music department, and he wrote a vast body of choral music. His early symphonies were substantial and brilliantly scored works, but following the First World War something in the way of creative energy seems to have deserted him. He spent twenty years completing his Fourth Symphony, and he left the Fifth a torso.

But it was his programmatic works drawing upon Swedish folk melody or the Swedish landscape (something that also played a role in the symphonies) that have kept his name alive, particularly one composed early on, the first of his three Swedish rhapsodies, with the title *Midsummer Vigil.* Midsummer's Eve in that far northern clime is marked by the fact that the sun barely sets at all, land even in the darkest nighttime hours there is a constant twilight and occasion for festivities and celebration. (Some sense of the eerie effect of a night with no darkness is offered in Ingmar Bergman's comic film *Smiles of Summer Night,* which is the source for Steven Sondheim's musical *A Little Night Music.*)

The *Midsummer Vigil* is so immediately catchy, mixing together lively tunes depicting the varied activities of such a night, to which Alfvén offered a detailed program, calling the work a "paean to the Swedish character and the Swedish nature at Midsummer." He first thought of writing a work like this in the early 1890s, but he only composed it in the summer of 1903, a summer when he was falling in love with Maria Krøyer, who was then married to a painter, Peder Severin Krøyer, but who was soon to become his wife (shades of the Bergman film!).

Midsummer Vigil is one of those works that is so tuneful and immediately charming that it has usually been relegated to the world of pops concerts, which is a loss for more traditional classical concerts. Indeed, so catchy is it that Percy Faith arranged a three-minute abridgement for his orchestra and had a major hit with it under the title *Swedish Rhapsody.* Alfvén's original, at its full length, offers more color and a much richer variety of ideas.

LEROY ANDERSON
Piano Concerto
Leroy Anderson was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on June 29, 1908, and died in Woodbury, Connecticut, on May 18, 1875. He composed his Piano Concerto in 1953. He conducted the first performance in Chicago with the Grant Park Symphony and soloist Eugene List, on July 18, 1953. Duration is about 19 minutes.

Leroy Anderson became a well-known composer largely by the chance that he went to Harvard. And that happened simply because Harvard admitted a certain number of well-prepared young men (no women at that time) from Cambridge, the city where the university is located, who couldn't otherwise afford to attend. But it wasn't his thorough training with Edward Ballantine, Georges Enesco, and Walter Piston that marked the course of his life so much as the fact that, in 1936, as conductor of the Harvard University Band, he was asked by the Boston Symphony Orchestra's general manager, George Judd, to prepare an orchestral arrangement of Harvard songs and to conduct it with the Boston Pops at the orchestra's annual Harvard Night for the twenty-fifth reunion of Judd's Harvard class.

Arthur Fiedler, then still in the early years of his half-century directorship of the Pops, was favorably impressed with Anderson's skill in orchestration. Thus emboldened, the young man showed Fiedler a little specialty piece called *Jazz Pizzicato*, an encore number for orchestral strings. When it was first played, in 1937, it made such a hit that Fiedler promptly named Anderson the chief arranger of the Boston Pops. Thus began a remarkable series of novelty numbers for orchestra, marked by a flair for catchy melody, a lively sense of orchestral effect (including unusual instruments, such the typewriter in *The Typewriter* or a trumpet played to sound like a neighing horse in *Sleigh Ride*), and the use of popular dance rhythms. In addition to arrangements of others= music, Anderson created a superb series of original pieces that have become popular light orchestral favorites everywhere, and some of them—including *The Syncopated Clock* and *Blue Tango*--even made the Hit Parade.

Only rarely did he venture beyond the orchestral miniature. His Broadway musical *Goldilocks* opened the 1958-59 season, with Elaine Stritch and Don Ameche. The music had many charms, but it lacked a big love song, and the book by Jean and Walter Kerr, was considered heavy-handed. He never tried Broadway again.

Similarly he apparently decided that the Piano Concerto, his only work in a full-scale classical form, did not satisfy him. After just three performances, in Chicago, St. Louis, and Cleveland, in 1953 and 1954, he withdrew the work. Not until 14 years after Anderson's death was the concerto heard again, when conductor Erich Kunzel prevailed upon the composer's family to allow a performance in Toronto, where he was conductor. Since then it has received many more performances and a recording. Listeners who know Anderson's delightful miniatures will find many touches that recall the charm and wit of his music, and only grumps who insist that only somber music can be regarded as truly serious will complain of its return to the concert hall, even if it sometimes suggests the worlds of Broadway and Hollywood—it is none the worse for reflecting the real musical world in which its composer lived. In any case, Leroy Anderson's gift for enticing melody and his flair for effective orchestral colors never desert him.

GEORGE GERSHWIN
Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, N.Y, on September 26, 1898, and died in Hollywood, California, on July 11, 1937. He composed Rhapsody in Blue *early in 1924 and played the piano part at the first performance, which took place in Aeolian Hall, New York, with Paul Whiteman and his Band, and February 12, 1924. Ferde Grofé scored the work for the Whiteman Band (it was he, too, who later produced the full orchestra version). In addition to the solo piano, the full orchestra score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, three optional saxophones (two alto, one tenor), optional banjo, timpani, three percussionists (snare drum, suspended cymbal, crash cymbals, glockenspiel, triangle, bass drum, tamtam, and strings. Duration is about 16 minutes.*

A perpetual debate of the '20s revolved around the subject of jazz. Was it good music? (Some even asked if it was music at all.) Could it be employed in traditional classical forms and media? Did listening to jazz bring about the inevitable corruption of taste, the destruction of the home, and immorality of every kind? Most established composers, with their European training, had a simple answer: Jazz was not good music; listening to it tended to destroy all that was wholesome and uplifting in western culture.

A few composers of traditional training were more open-minded, though. Charles Martin Loeffler, the immigrant American composer who had been assistant concertmaster of the Boston Symphony for twenty years before the turn of the century, haunted nightspots with his young friend George Gershwin whenever Gershwin was in Boston for the opening of a new show, and he even tried his hand at some jazz-tinged chamber music. Still earlier the Frenchman Darius Milhaud had produced a scandalously successful ballet, *La Création du monde*, employing musical elements picked up in Harlem in the early years of the decade. But probably the man most responsible for making jazz respectable to white audiences was Paul Whiteman, who thus served much the same function that Elvis Presley later did with respect to rock 'n roll. Whiteman was not a real jazzman himself, but he was a solid musician who wanted to use whatever was new in the world of popular music. Not the least of his contributions to our musical life was the encouragement of "symphonic jazz," which produced the first concert success by George Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*. And that success in turn began to set Gershwin thinking of working in larger forms and produced, in addition to his string of hit shows and wonderful songs, such works as the Concerto in F, *An American in Paris*, and *Porgy and Bess*.

In the fall of 1923, Whiteman told Gershwin that he wanted to produce a concert that would celebrate the *rapprochement* between symphonic music and jazz, and that he expected a contribution from Gershwin--who promptly forgot about the conversation, only to suddenly reminded on January 3, 1924. George was playing pool with Buddy DeSylva (of the songwriting team DeSylva, Brown and Henderson) while Ira was reading the *Herald Tribune* when he suddenly came across an announcement of Whiteman=s concert, AAn Experiment in Modern Music,@ to be given in New York's Aeolian Hall on February 12. According to the paper, George would produce a Ajazz concerto@ for the event. Whiteman had been the conductor of the 1922 *George White=s Scandals* for which Gershwin had written a one-act opera entitled *Blue Monday*, his first attempt to create a

theatrical work with African-American characters, later to be so richly developed in *Porgy and Bess*. Though *Blue Monday* was a flop with the audience (it was much too serious for a frivolous revue like the *Scandals*), it made a deep impression on Whiteman, who regarded Gershwin as the man of the hour.

Whiteman=s concert, so the announcement ran, would involve a committee of judges whose task it would be to pass on the question, "What is American music?" (Ironically—but typically for the time—not one of the judges was American; they included Sergei Rachmaninoff, Jascha Heifetz, Efrem Zimbalist, and Alma Gluck.) Given the shortness of time, and Gershwin=s limited experience in scoring his works, Whiteman offered the services of his arranger, Ferde Grofé, to orchestrate the new work as it was being composed.

At the time, Gershwin was busily putting the finishing touches on a show called *Sweet Little Devil*, which was due to open in New York on 21 January. The *Rhapsody* took shape in his mind as he was traveling to Boston for the show's out-of-town tryout.

> I had already done some work on the rhapsody. It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang that is often so stimulating to a composer...I frequently hear music in the very heart of noise. And there 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 mind and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated 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.

Later, at a party in New York, Gershwin was improvising on the piano--as he invariably did at social gatherings--when, as he later said, AI heard myself playing a theme the must have been haunting me inside, seeking outlet. [It] oozed out of my fingers.@ Ira, who was becoming not only Gershwin=s closest collaborator on the lyrics, but also his best listener, encouraged him to use this theme as the lyrical climax of the work, a real contrast to the jazziness of the opening. Later on, though, when he was convinced that he had found what he wanted, Gershwin carefully notated all the details of the solo part. The famous opening clarinet glissando actually predated the rest of the composition. Whiteman's clarinetist Ross Gorman had developed the trick of playing a two-octave upward glissando, something that had been believed impossible before. Gershwin had already been captivated by this sound, which was familiar from the Jewish klezmer tradition. He had attempted to notate it in one of his sketchbooks, and early on he thought of it as the perfect opening for the work.

Time was so short that Gershwin left a number of the solo piano spots blank, to be improvised in the performance (Whiteman=s score simply said, Await for nod.@) And Victor Herbert, who had a piece of his own on the concert (his last work to be performed publicly, since he died suddenly just three months later), was present at the rehearsals and made a suggestion regarding the shape of the piece that Gershwin accepted. (There is something particularly touching in this incident: Victor Herbert, the last great figure of an earlier generation of American popular music—his career had begun when he played for Liszt in the 1880s and spent a year in the Strauss orchestra in Vienna—was a man of great generosity who recognized and welcomed Gershwin's talent; he even offered him

free lessons in orchestration, which the younger man was not yet ready to accept, and by the time was interested in pursuing that skill, Herbert had died.)

Though Whiteman had announced a Aconcerto,@ Gershwin decided that it would be better to follow the freer form of the rhapsody. The score plays with the ambivalence between major and minor, with choices of notes called Ablue@ from their use in the traditional singing style of the blues, which hover between major and minor and sometimes right in between. The prevalence of Ablue@ notes and the rhapsodic ground plan of the work suggested to Ira the title that George gratefully accepted: *Rhapsody in Blue*--the first word redolent of the European tradition, the remainder instantly evocative of modern America.

Whiteman=s Aeolian Hall concert was billed as one of the major new musical events of the season, and the glittering audience included just about every musical dignitary in New York that week. But it was much too long, and as it dragged on and on, it began to appear the Whiteman's "Experiment in Modern Music" was a bust. Victor Herbert's *Suite of Serenades*, at the beginning of the second half, aroused the greatest interest to that point on the program, though it was not in any sense a jazz composition, but rather a series of clever "characteristic" pieces scored for jazz orchestra. *Rhapsody in Blue* came next-to-last on the program, when the audience was more than a little restive. Gershwin strode out to the piano and nodded to Whiteman; the performance began with Ross Gorman's clarinet "wail." The effect was electrifying. This was something really new, and everyone recognized it at once. The audience response at the end was rapturous. Critical response in the press ranged from enthusiastic to highly negative, but the work was performed repeatedly that spring, and, by June 10, Gershwin and the Whiteman band had already committed the first version to disc (in slightly abridged form). The *Rhapsody* has remained the most frequently performed of comparable contemporary scores, despite persistent nagging criticisms of its loose structure. The composer himself, when Irving Kolodin asked him a decade later whether he didn't think he could work it over and improve it, replied, "I don't know; people seemed to like it the way it was, so I left it that way."

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH
Jazz Suite No. 2 (Suite for Variety Orchestra No. 1)

Dmitri Shostakovich was born in St. Petersburg on September 25, 1906, and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He composed the Suite in the spring of 1938 for Victor Knushevitzky's State Jazz Orchestra of the USSR.

Jazz reached Russia in 1922—a slightly belated arrival, given the fact that the new music from America had been a craze in western Europe since the end of World War I—and it had taken root in Russia by 1925, the same year in which Shostakovich, on the verge of graduating from the Leningrad Conservatory, produced his First Symphony. For some years the new music was very popular. During the 1920s and into the early 1930s, the Soviet government honored and celebrated many innovations in the arts, especially those that, like jazz, seemed to arouse the enthusiasm of the masses who were, ostensibly, the happy recipients of the new governmental system. In 1934 Shostakovich composed a suite for jazz orchestra. Four years later he composed a second such suite. By that time jazz was being attacked as a foreign art form. Clearly the Party had begun to realize that imaginative artists ask questions in their works, and those questions might not receive the

answers that the authorities in power want to hear. Moreover jazz was so explicitly a creation of musicians in the United States—a society which Soviet government promised to overthrow, that the music had come to be regarded with suspicion.

The government tried to overwhelm the enemy by joining him: the creation of the State Jazz Orchestra of the USSR was supposed to allow jazz to be performed safely, devoid of western influence. The ensemble was put into the hands of a classically-trained musician, Victor Knushevitsky, who knew nothing of jazz, and who gradually turned the group into a huge forty-three piece ensemble that played with splendid precision but no jazz feeling at all.

Shostakovich was asked to write a piece for the ensemble. Given the suspicions about earlier (and unofficial) jazz compositions, he claimed never to have written in the style, but accepted the commission. Three movements (which he reworked after rehearsals to make them sound more "jazzy") were performed on November 28, 1938. That work consisted of three movements (Scherzo, Lullaby, and Serenade). This is completely different from the work, in eight short movements, that was later published under the title Jazz Suite No. 2.

A great deal of confusion still exists about the two works, Shostakovich authority Laurel Fay says that the actual second jazz suite is lost. The work at hand, though delightful, has no elements of jazz at all and has come to be labeled, more appropriately, the Suite for Variety Orchestra. With waltzes and polkas predominating, it sounds much more closely allied to the music of the Viennese operetta than to American jazz clubs. Still it is catchy and attractive, and it lets us hear a smiling Shostakovich that we know too little.

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