

# SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

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## ABOUT THE MUSIC

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### Master of the Modern Banjo | November 2, 3, & 4, 2019

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#### AARON COPLAND

#### Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo*



Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 14, 1900, and died in New York City on December 2, 1990. He wrote the ballet *Rodeo* on a commission from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, composing it in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, between May and September 1942. The work was premiered at the (old) Metropolitan Opera House on October 16 that year, with Franz Allers conducting. Agnes de Mille choreographed and danced the lead role. The concert piece “Four Dance Episodes from *Rodeo*” comprises all but about five minutes of the full ballet. The score calls for three flutes (second and third doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, glockenspiel, cymbals, wood block, snare drum, slapstick, bass drum, triangle, celesta, piano, harp and strings. Duration is about 18 minutes.

#### ABOUT THE MUSIC

*Rodeo* is the second of the three popular Copland ballets on American subjects, but it is one that Copland did not, at first, look forward to composing. *Billy the Kid*, composed for Eugene Loring and the Ballet Caravan, had achieved a great success in 1938. Four years later, as the composer recalls in *Copland: 1900 through 1942*, conductor Franz Allers took him to meet Agnes de Mille, who had an idea for a ballet.

When de Mille explained that she wanted to create a cowboy ballet, Copland said he had already written one of those and didn't want to repeat himself. But “Agnes was after something lighter and more bouncy,” he recalled, after she demonstrated some of the steps she was planning to use. So, he agreed. He began composing in May 1942 and had much of the score in his head already before leaving to spend the summer at Tanglewood.

It was the war that gave Agnes de Mille the opportunity to create the ballet. The management of the Ballet Russe decided that an American subject and an American choreographer might be a good patriotic idea. The Russian-trained dancers required extra rehearsals, because their Russian classical training had not prepared them for cowboy lopes and folk-dance groupings. In addition, they needed to have the humor of the piece explained to them. But they got it, and the ballet was a huge success. The company gave seventy-nine performances in the first year alone.

*Rodeo* tells a simple story with warmth and humor. The tomboyish heroine on a western ranch is pining for the handsome head wrangler, but, despite her skill with horse and rope, he pays no attention to her. When the cowgirl is thrown by a bucking bronco, the city girls who have come to the ranch for the evening's party tease her, while the head wrangler goes off with the rancher's daughter. At the Saturday night dance, still in her ranch clothes, she is unnoticed

until she turns in her chaps and cowboy boots for a pretty dress and a bow in her hair. When she returns, looking just as pretty as any of the other girls, she turns all heads—especially that of the head wrangler. But when he invites her to dance, she turns him down in favor of another cowhand who had been friendly before her transformation. (In an interview late in her life, de Mille said, “You can’t imagine some of the letters people have had the idiocy to write me—one said that Women’s Lib should take action against this ballet! Well, in 1895 or 1900 a woman had to have a man or she was considered an outcast and became the family drudge.”)

As with *Billy the Kid*, Copland chose real cowboy songs as part of the basic material of his ballet, though here, too, he does more than simply quote them literally. *Rodeo* gives him the opportunity to treat the tunes with welcome humor, emphasizing certain details to make them stand out. Early in the first movement, “Buckaroo Holiday,” Copland treats part of the tune “Sis Joe” to irregular drum punctuation to emphasize its energetic and clipped character. Later on, the solo trombone plays “If he’d be a buckaroo by his trade” with humorous portamentos and witty exaggerated pauses. (Copland found both these tunes in *Our Singing Country* by John and Alan Lomax.) The second movement, “Corral Nocturne” has no borrowed tunes. “Saturday Night Waltz” begins with the sound of country fiddlers tuning up, then offers a danceable near-quotation of “Goodbye, old Paint.” The final “Hoe Down” is based on the traditional fiddle tune “Bonyparte” (along with a brief citation of “McLeod’s Reel”); Copland found the tunes in Ira Ford’s *Traditional Music of America*.

In *Rodeo*, as in *Billy the Kid*, Copland uses the old tunes to give a melodic “feel,” a way of evoking the specific time and place. But his score is far more than a simple orchestration of a couple of old songs; he takes over the tunes fully, developing and elaborating them with wit, rhythmic verve, and varied orchestral color, transmuting them fully into the characteristic and instantly recognizable musical personality that we know as Aaron Copland.

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## BÉLA FLECK

### *Juno Concerto for banjo*



*Béla Anton Leoš Fleck was born in New York City on July 10, 1958, his three given names paying homage to three 20th-century composers, Bartók, Webern and Janáček. He composed the Juno Concerto for the Canton Symphony, Gerhardt Zimmermann, conductor, and played the solo part in the first performance on March 19, 2016. In addition to the solo banjo, the score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, two tenor trombones and bass trombone, timpani, three percussionists (vibraphone, maraca, shaker, tambourine, bass drum, gong, tenor drum, side drum, suspended cymbals, claves, crash cymbals, triangle, chimes) and strings. Duration is about 30 minutes.*

#### **ABOUT THE MUSIC**

The banjo has traditionally been regarded as an instrument created for folk music, originating in Africa and being further developed once it was brought by enslaved Africans to the New World. Over the centuries, the banjo has been a frequent part of ensembles performing traditional dance and country music, gradually spreading into different categories. Fleck developed an interest in the banjo, first of all from hearing the theme of the television show *Beverly Hillbillies*, which featured Earl Scruggs. After getting a banjo as a present on his fifteenth birthday, he studied—largely through books by Pete Seeger and others. After graduating from New York’s High School of Music and Art, he began what has been a busy and varied career playing the banjo in all kinds of ensembles, becoming a highly regarded soloist on the instrument and increasingly recognized as a composer, including partnerships with various classical composers, with whom he joins his banjo.

The *Juno Concerto* is his second concerto for banjo and orchestra, named after his son, Juno. It is cast in the traditional three movements. The first opens with fanfares and open harmonies that recall, in a way, the music of Aaron Copland,

especially his cowboy ballet Billy the Kid. The banjo solo is playful, anticipating and echoing the orchestral themes. It becomes increasingly virtuosic in the second half of the opening movement.

The middle movement begins with a kind of hesitating vamp in the banjo, to which sustained low tones in the orchestral strings add depth. Soon the banjo begins suggesting a gentle dancelike figure that is developed into a cadenza-like middle passage for the soloist. The last half of the movement offers poignant themes, especially with the winds in dialogue with the banjo.

The orchestra sets up a fast opening for the finale, building quickly to a climax on which the banjo enters with racing figures that bring the various sections of the orchestra in an energetic debate that continues to a dynamic climax.

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## MUSSORGSKY/RAVEL

### *Pictures at an Exhibition*



*Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky was born at Karevo, district of Pskov, on March 21, 1839, and died in St. Petersburg on March 28, 1881. He composed Pictures at an Exhibition as a suite of piano pieces in June 1874. Maurice Ravel made his orchestral transcription in the summer of 1922, for Serge Koussevitzky, who introduced it at one of his own concerts in Paris on October 22, 1922. Ravel's orchestration calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, alto saxophone, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, bells, triangle, tam-tam, rattle, whip, cymbals, side drum, bass drum, xylophone, celesta, two harps and strings. Duration is about 35 minutes.*

#### **ABOUT THE MUSIC**

Mussorgsky's music is the triumph of genius over technique. Though he had possibly the least formal training of any of the Russian "Five" (nationalist composers—including also Cui, Balakirev, Borodin, and Rimsky-Korsakov—who sought to create a purely Russian musical style) and was regarded as little more than a dilettante by composers of far greater polish, Mussorgsky had a burning originality that at times was able to conquer both his lack of technique and a sad addiction to the bottle that led to an unstable life and an early demise. His genius expressed itself most directly in opera, for he had the ability to translate verbal and physical gestures into extraordinarily imaginative, lifelike music.

His best-known, non-operatic composition is the suite *Pictures at an Exhibition* for piano solo, one of the great achievements of Russian nationalism. Even here Mussorgsky was inspired by a kind of dramatic event. The exhibition in question was a real one, a memorial showing of works by an architect named Victor Hartman, who had died at the age of forty in July 1873. Mussorgsky was a close friend of the artist.

The news of Hartman's death shocked Vladimir Stasov, critic and spokesman for a whole generation of Russian artists and friend to both Mussorgsky and Hartman. At Stasov's initiative, a special exhibition of Hartman's work was put together in St. Petersburg, where it opened in early 1874. The exhibition had a powerful effect on Mussorgsky. Within a week of seeing it, he wrote to Stasov with good news: "Hartman is boiling as Boris boiled." This was his way to say that he was deeply involved in composition and that it was going well. He continued: "Sounds and ideas have been hanging in the air; I am devouring them and stuffing myself—I barely have time to scribble them on paper...My profile can be seen in the interludes...How well it is working out."

Composing at a terrific pace, Mussorgsky finished the work by June 22. The suite was immediately hailed by his friends, particularly Stasov, to whom he dedicated it. Yet few people played the suite; it is fiendishly difficult. *Pictures* only

became famous and popular in the brilliant orchestral guise created by Maurice Ravel in 1922 at the suggestion of conductor Serge Koussevitzky. The various “pictures” are linked here and there by references to the opening Promenade, which, as Mussorgsky reported, was his own self-portrait, “roving through the exhibition, now leisurely, now briskly in order to come close to a picture that had attracted his attention, and at times sadly, thinking of his departed friend.” Most of the pictures are lost, but we have Stasov’s description of the exhibition to tell us about them.

The Gnome was a grotesque drawing for a child’s toy, “something in the style of the fabled Nutcracker, the nuts being inserted into the gnome’s mouth.” [Promenade] The Old Castle depicted an Italian landscape with a troubadour singing his lay. Ravel makes this an extended saxophone solo, one of the most famous passages for that instrument in the orchestral repertory. [Promenade] Tuileries, a Parisian scene, showed children quarreling at play in the famous gardens, an image perfectly captured in the taunting musical figure (the universal children’s cry of “Nyah, nyah!”). Bydlo is the Polish word for “cattle”; Hartman’s picture showed a heavy ox-cart lumbering along. [Promenade] The unlikely sounding Ballet of unhatched chicks consisted of designs for an 1871 ballet with choreography by Petipa, who always included a scene with child dancers. In this case the children were dressed as canaries “enclosed in eggs as in suits of armor, with canary heads put on like helmets.”

Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle: Mussorgsky himself owned Hartman’s drawings (two separate images, not one) of “A rich Jew wearing a fur hat” and “A poor Jew.” He transmuted these into a single movement, contrasting the arrogance of wealth to the cringing obsequiousness of poverty.[Promenade] Hartman’s lively drawing of The Market at Limoges becomes a brilliant scherzo, for which he even imagined some of the conversation of the shopping housewives, for he entered bits of their dialogue in the margin of the score. The scherzo ends with dramatic suddenness in the powerful contrasting scene of the Catacombs (A Roman Sepulchre) in Paris. Mussorgsky noted in the margin: “The creative spirit of the dead Hartman leads me toward skulls, apostrophizes them—the skulls are illuminated gently from within.” The mood is continued in the passage headed *Con mortuis in lingua morta* (“With the dead in a dead language”), in which Mussorgsky himself becomes our guide through the city of the dead with a ghostly version of his Promenade. The Hut on Fowl’s Legs (Baba Yaga) evokes the fearsome witch of Russian fairy tales; Mussorgsky’s music suggests rather the witch’s wild flight in a mortar in chase of her victims. Her ride brings us to the powerful finale of the suite, The Bogatyr Gate (at Kiev, the Ancient Capital), described by Stasov as “unusually original,” a design for a series of arched stone gates to replace the wooden city gates to commemorate Tsar Alexander II’s from an attempted assassination. Mussorgsky filled his musical image with the perpetual ringing of bells large and small, recreating the sounds heard around a Russian public monument, and Ravel has seconded him in this, capping off the score with sonorous fireworks.