

SANTA ROSA SYMPHONY

ABOUT THE MUSIC

AMERICAN RHAPSODY | FEB 12, 13 & 14, 2022

Program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Darker America (symphonic poem) for Orchestra



COMPOSER: born May 11, 1895, Woodville, Mississippi; died December 3, 1978, Los Angeles

WORK COMPOSED: 1924

WORLD PREMIERE: Eugene Goosens led the first performance at Aeolian Hall in New York on November 22, 1926

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes, oboe, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, horn, trumpet, trombone, cymbal, bass drum, piano and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 12 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Known as “the dean of African American composers,” William Grant Still composed music in a wide variety of genres: symphonies, opera, chamber music, choral works, solo songs and concertos. As a young man, he made his living playing commercial music on violin, oboe and banjo. Over his six-decade career, Still worked as a performer, arranger, orchestrator, conductor and composer.

Still’s childhood and teen years were filled with music. He studied violin and taught himself to play a number of other instruments before graduating high school at 16. Still went on to attend Wilberforce College and Oberlin College, where he studied composition with George Whitefield Chadwick. During the 1920s, Still also worked privately with the French modernist composer Edgar Varèse. Under Varèse’s mentorship, Still met influential musicians and conductors, had his own works performed and expanded his compositional horizons.

Darker America, Still’s first work for orchestra, introduced the young man to audiences as a composer of formidable ability and intent. In his own detailed program note, Still wrote, “*Darker America*, as its title suggests, is representative of the American Negro. His serious side is presented and is intended to suggest the triumph of a people over their sorrows through fervent prayer. At the beginning the theme of the American Negro is announced by the strings in unison. Following a short development of this, the English horn announces the sorrow theme, which is followed immediately by the theme of hope, given to muted brass accompanied by string and woodwind. The sorrow theme returns, treated differently, indicative of more intense sorrow as contrasted to passive sorrow indicated at the initial appearance of the theme. Again, hope appears and the people seem about to rise above their troubles. But sorrow triumphs. Then the prayer is heard (given to oboe); the prayer of numbed rather than anguished souls. Strongly contrasted moods follow, leading up to the triumph of the people near the end, at which point the three principal themes are combined.”

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue for Piano and Orchestra



COMPOSER: born September 26, 1898, Brooklyn; died July 11, 1937, Hollywood

WORK COMPOSED: Gershwin wrote *Rhapsody in Blue* in the first three weeks of 1924.

WORLD PREMIERE: Gershwin was at the piano when Paul Whiteman's Orchestra premiered *Rhapsody in Blue* at Aeolian Hall in New York on February 12, 1924.

INSTRUMENTATION: solo piano, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, 3 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, gong, glockenspiel, snare drum, celesta, triangle, banjo and strings.

ESTIMATED DURATION: 15 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Rhapsody in Blue occupies a special place in American music: it introduced jazz to classical concert audiences, and simultaneously made an instant star of its composer. From its iconic opening clarinet glissando, right through its brilliant finale, *Rhapsody in Blue* epitomizes the Gershwin sound, and transformed the 25-year-old songwriter from Tin Pan Alley into a composer of "serious" music.

The story of how *Rhapsody in Blue* came about is as captivating as the music itself. On January 4, 1924, Ira Gershwin showed George a news report in the *New York Tribune* about a concert put together by jazz bandleader Paul Whiteman, grandiosely titled "An Experiment in Modern Music," that would endeavor to trace the history of jazz.

The report concluded with a brief announcement: "George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto." This was certainly news to Gershwin, who was then in rehearsals for a Broadway show, *Sweet Little Devil*. Gershwin contacted Whiteman to refute the Tribune article, but Whiteman eventually talked Gershwin into writing the concerto. Whiteman also sweetened the deal by offering to have Ferde Grofé do the orchestrations. Gershwin completed *Rhapsody in Blue* in three weeks, and was at the piano when Paul Whiteman and his Jazz Orchestra premiered *Rhapsody in Blue* at Aeolian Hall in New York on February 12, 1924.

In 1931, Gershwin described to biographer Isaac Goldberg how the ideas for *Rhapsody in Blue* came to him during a train trip to Boston: "It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang, that is so often so stimulating to a composer – I frequently hear music in the very heart of the noise ... And there I suddenly heard, and even saw on paper – the complete construction of the *Rhapsody*, from beginning to end ... I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite plot of the piece, as distinguished from its actual substance."

At the premiere, Gershwin's unique realization of this "musical kaleidoscope of America," coupled with his phenomenal abilities at the keyboard wowed the audience as much as the novelty of hearing jazz idioms in a "classical" work.

The original opening clarinet solo, written by Gershwin, got its trademark jazzy glissando from Whiteman's clarinetist Ross Gorman. This opening unleashes a floodgate of colorful ideas that blend seamlessly. The pulsing syncopated rhythms and showy music later give way to a warm, expansive melody that suggests the lush romanticism of Sergei Rachmaninoff.

FLORENCE PRICE

Concerto in D minor in One Movement for Piano and Orchestra



COMPOSER: born April 9, 1887, Little Rock, Arkansas; died June 3, 1953, Chicago

WORK COMPOSED: 1932-1934. Dedicated to Helen Armstrong Andrews.

WORLD PREMIERE: Frederick Stock led the Chicago Symphony with Price at the piano in 1934.

INSTRUMENTATION: solo piano, flute, oboe, 2 clarinets, bassoon, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, bass drum, crash cymbals, snare drum, suspended cymbal and strings

ESTIMATED DURATION: 18 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The first female African-American composer to earn a national reputation, and to have a symphony performed by a major orchestra, Florence Price enjoyed considerable renown during her lifetime. Sadly, both she and her music dropped into obscurity for decades after her death in 1953, but in recent years performers and audiences alike have begun to discover her rich legacy.

The daughter of a musical mother, Price was a prodigy, giving her first recital at age 4 and publishing her first composition at 11. During her childhood and teens, Price's mother was the guiding force behind her piano and composition studies. Young Florence entered New England Conservatory in 1903, at 16, where she double majored in organ performance and piano pedagogy. While at NEC, Price also studied composition with George Whitefield Chadwick. Chadwick was an early champion of women as composers, which was highly unusual at the time, and he believed that American composers should incorporate the rich traditions of Native American and "Negro" styles in their own works. Price, already inclined in this direction, was encouraged by Chadwick, and many of her works reflect the expressive and distinctive sounds of "Negro" traditions: spirituals, ragtime and folkdance rhythms, whose origins trace back to Africa.

In 1933, Frederick Stock, conductor of the Chicago Symphony, programmed Price's Symphony in E minor, on a concert titled "The Negro in Music," which was performed in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair. The following year, Stock asked Price to write a piano concerto, which she premiered with him and the Chicago Symphony in 1934.

Price's musical style combines European late-Romantic aesthetics with folk and popular music from the African-American tradition. The single movement of the concerto features three sections performed without breaks. It begins with slow introduction and a rhapsodic folk-like theme, in which the piano executes both the main melody and a dizzying display of virtuosic elaborations. In the quieter central section, we hear a more intimate facet of Price's voice. The tonality shifts to D major; the piano presents a theme redolent of both blues and gospel hymns, while the orchestra provides understated accompaniment. The closing section features a juba, an up-tempo folk dance with strong ragtime elements, including a powerful left-hand stride piano bass line.

AARON COPLAND

Appalachian Spring (complete ballet) for Orchestra



COMPOSER: born November 14, 1900, Brooklyn; died December 2, 1990, North Tarrytown, New York

WORK COMPOSED: 1943-1944. Copland won a Pulitzer Prize for the ballet score in 1945. Dedicated to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.

WORLD PREMIERE: Copland conducted the premiere of the ballet at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. on October 30, 1944, the birthday of arts patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.

INSTRUMENTATION: 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, bass drum, claves, cymbal, glockenspiel, orchestra bells, snare drum, tabor, triangle, wood bloc, xylophone, piano, harp and strings.

ESTIMATED DURATION: 35 minutes

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Shortly before the debut of *Ballet for Martha*, Aaron Copland's working title for the ballet Martha Graham had commissioned from him, the choreographer announced she had decided on the name *Appalachian Spring*. Graham, who borrowed the words from Hart Crane's poem, *The Dance*, admitted she had chosen it simply because she liked the sound of the words together. The spring in Crane's poem is a mountain creek, but Graham seems to have understood it to mean the season of spring, as she explained in her brief description of the ballet's narrative: "Part and parcel of our lives is that moment of Pennsylvania spring when there was 'a garden eastward of Eden.' Spring was celebrated by a man and woman building a house with joy and love and prayer; by a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation; by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the Promised Land."

"Over and over again," Copland recalled in 1981, "people come up to me after seeing the ballet on stage and say, 'Mr. Copland, when I see that ballet and when I hear your music I can just see the Appalachians and I just feel spring.' Well, I'm willing if they are!"

In *Appalachian Spring*, Copland's interest in folk melodies and idioms reaches its zenith. The Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts," which Copland discovered in a 1940 book on Shaker culture, and the celebratory variations of its melody, form the climax of *Appalachian Spring*. As scholar William Brooks notes, "In this context the Shaker melody came to serve as a kind of paradigm for the simplicity and authenticity of frontier America: mythical music for a mythical past." In similar fashion, Copland's music, particularly *Appalachian Spring*, became the paradigm for the "American" sound of the mid-20th century.

Copland explained his musical conception: "When I wrote *Appalachian Spring*, I was thinking primarily about Martha and her unique choreographic style, which I knew well. Nobody else seems quite like Martha: she's so proud, so very much herself. And she's unquestionably very American: there something prim and restrained, simple yet strong about her, which one tends to think of as American."

Edwin Denby, a noted dance critic, provided program notes: "A pioneer celebration in spring around a newly-built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the last century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, that their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house."

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Elizabeth Schwartz is a writer and music historian based in the Portland area. She has been a program annotator for more than 20 years, and works with music festivals and ensembles around the country. Ms. Schwartz has also contributed to NPR's "Performance Today" (now heard on American Public Media).

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