

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
February 9, 2019
Michael Allsen

Geoffrey Duce is the piano soloist in this program, playing two works in very different styles: Mendelssohn's *Rondo brilliant*, a work from the 19th-century virtuoso tradition, and Duke Ellington's jazz-inspired concerto *New World a-Comin'*. The piano solos frame a set of lighter classical works, opening with a series of three Viennese waltzes by Johann Strauss. The program also includes excerpts from Copland's *Rodeo* and one of Dvořák's lively *Slavonic Dances*.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)
Rondo brilliant in E-flat Major, Op.29

Mendelssohn completed this work on January 29, 1834. Duration 10:00.

Most of Mendelssohn's works for solo piano were intended for his own performances, but the *Rondo brilliant*—finished just a few days before the composer's 25th birthday—seems to have been intended for Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870). Moscheles had been Mendelssohn's teacher a decade earlier, and the two remained lifelong friends. This was of course the great era of the piano virtuoso, with pianist-composers like Liszt, Chopin, and Thalberg thrilling audiences with pianistic fireworks. While Moscheles seems to have been every bit as good a pianist as these more flashy virtuosos, his technique and compositions for the piano retained a slightly more restrained, "classical" character—also reflected in the piece Mendelssohn wrote for him.

The Rondo form is perfectly suited to a piece designed to showcase virtuosity: a recurring main theme serves to tie the piece together, while contrasting episodes allow the composer to explore different techniques and textures. In the *Rondo brilliant* there are a few brusque opening bars from the orchestra before the piano introduces the lively main theme. The piano remains the exclusive focus for the rest of the piece, in a series of episodes range in character from fiery to briefly lyrical. The virtuosity Mendelssohn calls for in the piano part is constantly exciting without ever becoming heavy-handed.

Johann Strauss II (1825-1899)
Sweetheart Waltz, Op. 418
Blue Danube Waltz, Op.314
Wine, Women, and Song, Op.333

These works were composed in 1885, 1867, and 1869. Duration approximately 21:00.

If the Viennese waltz seems to be inseparable from the name Strauss, it is with good reason. Johann Strauss (d. 1849), his sons Johann, Josef, and Eduard, and his grandson Johann not only wrote hundreds of waltzes, they in fact created a new genre. The waltz had already been popular for some decades in Vienna by the time Johann the elder started a dance orchestra in 1825. But the waltzes of Strauss and his rival Joseph Lanner established a new standard form for the dance: an introduction, a sequence of four or five waltz tunes, with two repeated phrases in each, and a coda. Strauss and Lanner also established the practice of giving these waltz sets picturesque titles. Designed for dancing, this form, lasting seven or eight minutes, was the perfect length to leave dancers breathing hard, but not too exhausted to whirl back on to the dance floor a few minutes later. (Of course, medical authorities and moralists of the day blamed waltzing for a whole range of physical and social ills!) The waltz became the first truly international dance craze, and Strauss's sons and grandson—particularly Johann II—continued to refine the form. Johann the younger, who initially went into music against his father's wishes, composed some 170 waltzes and was known universally as the "Waltz King." Our set of waltzes includes three of his works.

The tunes for Strauss's *Sweetheart Waltz* (*Schatz-Walzer* – sometimes translated as "Treasure Waltz") were drawn from his phenomenally successful 1885 operetta *Der Zigeunerbaron* (*The Gypsy Baron*). Based upon a popular novel, it centers on the story of Sándor Barinkay, a young exile from Hungary who returns home to find his father's castle in ruins and occupied by gypsies. Czipra, an old gypsy woman, and the beautiful Saffi, whom Czipra introduces as her daughter, help Barinkay recover a treasure buried in the old castle. He of course falls in love with Saffi who is revealed to be a princess, and Barinkay sadly leaves, knowing that his social status was too low to marry her. It all ends happily however: Barinkay goes off to become a military hero, is ennobled, and returns to marry his beloved. It was Strauss's usual practice on finishing an operetta to extract the best tunes to publish as a dance set, and he introduced the *Schatz-Walzer* at a ball in Vienna on November 22, 1885. The set opens with a brief military style march in 6/8 before launching into a series of four waltzes, culminating in a waltz based upon the duet for Czipra and Saffi, "Doch mehr als Gold und Geld ist Lieb' mit Treu' gesellt'" (But love and fidelity are stronger bonds than gold and cash).

The granddaddy of all Viennese waltzes is of course *The Blue Danube* (*Auf der schönen blauen Donau*). Though the orchestral version of this waltz is Strauss's most beloved and familiar composition, it was originally composed as a choral work. Longtime acquaintance Johann Herbeck, director of the best men's chorus in Vienna, talked him into writing a choral waltz for the 1867 Carnival season. Herbeck provided a text,

written by poet and librettist Josef Weyl: a rather sarcastic poem that referred to Austria's recent military defeat at the hands of the Germans. (*The Blue Danube* was later published with more conventionally sentimental lyrics by another poet.) Herbeck's choir, accompanied by a military orchestra, premiered the work on February 15, 1867. Strauss promptly created an instrumental version for the Strauss orchestra, and introduced it a few months later at the Paris Exhibition. It was such a sensation that several writers talked about *The Blue Danube* as a musical victory that balanced out Austria's military defeats. The waltz has remained popular ever since. Years later, when Strauss's wife asked the thoroughly serious and curmudgeonly Johannes Brahms to autograph her fan, Brahms—who was in fact on friendly terms with Strauss for many years—scrawled out the first few bars of *The Blue Danube* with the inscription "Leider nicht von Johannes Brahms" (Alas—not by Johannes Brahms"). The piece is constructed in the conventional five sections, but begins with a particularly long and beautiful introduction: hints of the main theme above string tremolos, before the theme emerges fully in the first waltz. There is a short brass passage that briefly stops the action at the midpoint, but the music soon picks up its lilting power in a new waltz theme. The dance closes with a grand coda that recalls all of the main ideas before ending with a flourish.

His *Wine, Woman, and Song* (*Wein, Weib und Gesang*) was also commissioned by Herbeck. It was introduced on February 2, 1869 as a choral waltz at a party for the Vienna Men's Choral Association. The original version had a lighthearted text based upon the old Austrian saying "Who loves not wine, women and song remains a fool his whole life long." After a particularly long and dramatic introduction, it launches into a lilting series of waltzes, culminating in an almost brash section dominated by the brass.

Aaron Copland (1900-1991) **"Saturday Night Waltz" and "Hoe-Down" from *Rodeo***

Copland's ballet Rodeo was written in 1942, and was first performed in Monte Carlo on October 16 of that year. The concert suite excerpted at this concert was premiered by the Boston Pops Orchestra on June 22, 1943. Duration 9 :00.

In his best-known works, written during the 1930s and 1940s, Copland cultivated a sparse, sometimes austere style that seemed to echo the sound of the American frontier. He sometimes made his musical nationality even more clear by making Jazz references, or by quoting American folk material in his works of (most notably, the Shaker tune *Simple Gifts* in the finale of his *Appalachian Spring*). The most famous works of the period are his great trilogy of ballets on American subjects: *Billy the Kid* (1938), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944). *Rodeo* was written for Agnes de Mille, who wrote to Copland in early 1942 asking him to write the score for a "cowboy ballet"

which she planned to choreograph for the Ballets Russe de Monte Carlo. Copland didn't originally want to do it ("Oh no! I've already done one of those!"), but she won him over, promising: "This is going to be different." Neither as serious nor as deep as the two other "American" ballets, *Rodeo*, subtitled "the Courting at Burnt Ranch," tells the story of a young cowgirl who desperately tries to find herself a man. When her efforts to impress the head cowhand by her ridin' and ropin' skills fail, she finally wins him over when she shows up at the Saturday night hoe-down in a lovely red dress. (Feminism was pretty much unknown in 1942...) De Mille referred to her story as "*The Taming of the Shrew...cowboy style.*"

The premiere performance of the ballet, in New York on October 16, 1942, was a stunning success, and Copland promptly produced a four-movement suite from the ballet, which was introduced by Arthur Fiedler and Boston Pops Orchestra. *Dance Episodes from "Rodeo"* has remained one of Copland's most popular works ever since, particularly the finale, *Hoe-Down*. The suite is just a slight modification of the ballet score, and closely follows the action of de Mille's story.

This program includes two excerpts from the suite. The waltz is usually the most graceful and lilting of dances, but is nothing even remotely Viennese about Copland's *Saturday Night Waltz*. After the fiddles tune up at the beginning, the waltz is mildly clumsy and deliberate, as cowboys do their level best not to step on their dance-partners' toes. The finale, Copland's famous *Hoe-Down*, is based upon two traditional square dance fiddle tunes, "Bonyparte" and "McCleod's Reel." Having finally caught her cowhand's eye during the waltz, our cowgirl leads everyone in a brisk square dance, which occasionally peters out, as the fiddlers and dancers catch their breath. Everything comes to a wild (and exhausted) conclusion in the final statement of the fiddle-tune.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Slavonic Dance No.1 in C major, Op.46, No.1

Dvořák composed his first set of Slavonic Dances in 1878. Though they were originally for piano duet, the composer quickly followed up with versions for orchestra. Duration 4:00.

By the mid-1870s, Dvořák was a success in his native Bohemia, and was beginning to look for attention in Vienna, the cosmopolitan capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1874, he applied for and won the Austrian State *Stipendium*: a substantial grant to artists. He would eventually win the prize four years in a row, and also won the admiration of one of the judges, Vienna's leading composer, Johannes Brahms. Only eight years older than Dvořák, Brahms would become a close friend, mentor, and a

strong champion of Dvořák's music in Vienna and beyond. In 1877, Brahms pressured his publisher, Simrock to publish one of Dvořák's *Stipendium* submissions, the *Moravian Duets*, a set of vocal pieces. Simrock published the duets (Opp. 20 and 29) and was impressed enough to offer Dvořák a commission for a newly-composed set of dances for piano duet. Piano works with "exotic" flavor sold very well at the time, and Simrock obviously wanted to repeat the success of Brahms's first two books of *Hungarian Dances*, which had been a hit as soon as they were published in 1869. While Brahms's piano duets were arrangements of well-known Hungarian folk songs and gypsy dances, Dvořák's set of eight *Slavonic Dances* (Op. 46 - published in 1878) were original compositions that used the varied and unique dance rhythms he had grown up with in Bohemia. They were an immediate hit, and Simrock quickly paid Dvořák to prepare orchestral versions of the dances. Eight years later, he provided a sequel—a second set of eight *Slavonic Dances* (Op.72).

Op.46, No.1 is the wild opener of the first set. Like all of the *Slavonic Dances*, this is based upon a Bohemian dance rhythm—in this case a *furiant*. (The name is from the Czech for a "proud, swaggering man.") This rhythm, which also shows up Dvořák's symphonies, is a strongly-accented dance. The main theme is a brash melody punctuated by the timpani and brass. Slightly gentler woodwind ideas provide a bit of contrast. Both ideas are reprised, and in the end, things seem to wind down—before a final raucous phrase of the *furiant*.

Duke Ellington (1899–1974)

New World a-Comin' (Piano Concerto)

This work was written in 1943, and Ellington performed it with his band at Carnegie Hall on December 11, 1943. An orchestral version was prepared by Maurice Peress, and premiered in 1988 on a recording that featured pianist Roland Hanna. Duration 14:00

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, among America's greatest composers, was usually known as a jazz artist, but he was never comfortable having his music categorized as just jazz. Certainly most of his 2000 works were written for his own big band, a finely-tuned "instrument." However, his later works, particularly music written after he began collaborating with Billy Strayhorn in the 1940s, move beyond jazz forms and expression. On January 11, 1943 Ellington and his band became the first African American jazz band to perform in Carnegie Hall, where he introduced an ambitious three-part work titled *Black Brown and Beige*, which he described as a "tone parallel to the history of the Negro in America." Ellington would stage six more Carnegie Hall concerts over the next few years.

New World a-Comin' was written for his second Carnegie Hall concert. It takes its title from the best-selling book by journalist Roi Ottney *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America*. Ottney's book described life for African Americans in Harlem, but also expressed hope for improvement in conditions for all African Americans in the postwar world. For his part Ellington described what he wanted to express in the piece: "I visualized this new world as a place in the distant future, where there would be no war, no greed, no categorization, no non-believers, where love was unconditional, and no pronoun was good enough for God."

Many of Ellington's works exist in multiple versions: it was his practice to rewrite pieces entirely as new instrumentalists came into his band in order to make best use of the capabilities of individual players. But the history of *New World a-Comin'* is particularly complicated. After the 1943 version was performed at Carnegie Hall, it was not performed complete until the 1960s, when Ellington prepared a dramatically revised version for orchestra. Ellington himself never wrote down the piano part, and both the original big-band and orchestral parts were lost. Nine years after his death, his son Mercer asked Maurice Peress, a conductor who had collaborated with Ellington in the 1960s, to reconstruct *New World a-Comin'* from a recording of the 1943 performance. This was premiered at the Kool Jazz Festival in 1983, and Peress produced a version for orchestra five years later. The orchestral version heard here was assembled by Luther Henderson, Jeff Tyzik, and John Nyerges.

Though it is often described as a piano concerto, Ellington biographer David Schiff has more aptly described *New World a-Comin'* as a "soliloquy for solo piano amplified and extended by orchestral episodes." Set in a continuous three-part form, it opens with dreamy, blues-inflected introduction, which is then picked up and amplified by the solo piano. A second theme has a resemblance to Ellington's famous "Mood Indigo." The middle section is dominated by a harder-swinging motive introduced by the piano. All of these ideas are brought together the third section, which concludes with an enormous solo cadenza and four dramatic chords from the orchestra.

