Sunday, November 24, 2019 | 2:00 PM

American Tribute

Dr. Robert G. Hasty, Music Director
North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie

Concerto in F Major ................................................................. George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Allegro
Adagio – Andante con moto
Allegro agitato

Lydia Pui, piano
First Place Winner, Bonnie and Lee Malmed Young Artists Competition 2019

Intermission

Symphony No. 9, op. 95 B. 178 in E minor (From the New World) ..................... Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Adagio
Largo
Scherzo
Allegro con fuoco

This concert is supported in part by

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PROGRAM NOTES

Gershwin – Concerto in F

Arnold Schoenberg once said that George Gershwin was a rare composer "whose feelings actually coincide with those of the average man." As a Broadway composer, Gershwin had a stream of hits that certainly resonated with the 'average man' and which, in turn, earned him sums unheard of in the classical music world. Stravinsky, noting that Gershwin made over $100,000 in a year, observed that perhaps the popular young composer should give him lessons. Yet, despite his success in the realms of Broadway and popular song, Gershwin was determined to write serious music and, in fact, was trained in the classics at a young age.

When Gershwin's immigrant parents purchased a used piano for his brother Ira, young George was the one who demonstrated an unusual musical gift. He began taking lessons with neighborhood teachers but soon moved on to the well-known pedagogue Charles Hambitzer, who hailed his 14 year-old pupil as a genius. Hambitzer saw to it that Gershwin had a firm foundation in the classics, writing: "He wants to go in for this modern stuff, jazz and what not. But I'm not going to let him for a while. I'll see that he gets a firm foundation in the standard music first." Hambitzer's early death probably contributed to Gershwin's diversion from a career as a concert pianist. At age 15, he left school and his musical studies behind to take a job as a song plugger in a music store, where he played and sang newly published works to encourage sales. One day during a break, a customer heard him playing Bach and asked the young man if he was studying to become a concert pianist. Gershwin replied, "No, I'm studying to become a great popular songwriter." A year later he did just that.

In 1918 Gershwin published his first hit song, “Swanee,” and within a year had composed his first musical. During the 1920s and 30s he wrote one brilliant musical after another, including Lady Be Good, Funny Face, Girl Crazy, and Of Thee I Sing. His tunes from these shows proved to have lasting appeal and many became standards. Along with Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, Gershwin helped usher in the so-called Golden Age of the American musical theater.

Despite his tremendous success, Gershwin still harbored the desire to compose ‘serious’ music. In an effort to increase his technical mastery, he studied with various teachers including Rubin Goldmark at Julliard, Wallingford Riegger, and Henry Cowell. A request to Ravel for composition lessons was reportedly met with this reply: "Why be a second-rate Ravel when you are a first-rate Gershwin?" This setback aside, his career in the concert hall was launched in 1924 with Rhapsody in Blue. Composed at the behest of bandleader Paul Whiteman, Rhapsody was Gershwin's attempt to blend the idioms of jazz and classical music, and to demonstrate that jazz was a respectable art form. Among those present at the star-studded premier was conductor Walter Damrosch, who immediately commissioned Gershwin to write a full-scale piano concerto for his New York Symphony Orchestra. Gershwin accepted the challenge, in part to prove that the success of Rhapsody was no fluke: "Many persons had thought that the Rhapsody was only a happy accident. Well, I went out, for one thing, to show them that there was more where that had come from. I made up my mind to do a piece of absolute music. The Rhapsody was a blues impression. The Concerto would be unrelated to any program."

Gershwin completed the full score on November 10, 1925. Later that month he hired 50 musicians to play through the work in a trial performance. He recalled: "My greatest musical thrill? The time that I first heard my Concerto in F played by an orchestra. You can imagine my delight when it sounded just as I had planned.‘The premier, on December 3, before an audience packed with musical elites, was an enormous success.

Concerto in F successfully combines the structure of a standard concerto with many rhythmic and harmonic elements drawn from popular music and jazz. It also shows Gershwin's considerable development in compositional technique, particularly in orchestration. Here, the composer orchestrated the entire work himself, unlike the Rhapsody in Blue which was scored by Ferde Grofé. There are also strong thematic links among the three movements, and each movement demonstrates a structural integrity that is missing in Rhapsody. This structural foundation, while perhaps not immediately apparent to the listener, is rooted in the classical tradition.

Gershwin firmly believed that “to express the richness of American life fully, a composer must employ melody, harmony, and counterpoint as great composers of the past have employed them.” To that end, he modeled the Concerto upon the three traditional movements of the concerto genre: an opening sonata form, a slow movement, and a rondo finale.
Gershwin described the first movement as “quick and pulsating, reflecting the young, enthusiastic spirit of American life.” It begins with a rhythmic motif given out by the timpani drums. The main theme is announced by the bassoon. The orchestral section that follows utilizes the rhythm of the popular dance, the Charleston. The slow, sultry second theme, introduced by the piano, is lushly harmonized. This is interrupted by frantic orchestral entries that lead into a furious, dance-like theme. The development section begins with a return to the opening material before evolving into variations on the sultry theme. Gershwin continues to toy with these contrasting motifs before bringing back the main theme for the recapitulation.

The slow second movement “has a poetic, nocturnal atmosphere which has come to be referred to as the American blues...” In actuality, the Andante reflects the blues more in character than in structure, as it moves far beyond the typical 12-bar pattern of traditional blues. The main theme is introduced by a muted trumpet and seems somewhat related to that of the first movement. This theme is taken up by the piano, to the accompaniment of banjo-like strumming in the strings. A new melody, broad and tender, appears in the orchestra, before the movement subsides in the smoky atmosphere where it began.

The third and final movement, according to Gershwin, “reverts to the style of the first. It is an orgy of rhythm, starting violently and keeping the same pace throughout.” Where the first two movements were driven by their strong melodic content, the third propel itself more by virtue of its hammering rhythms. In form it is a rather complex rondo, in which the main theme repeatedly alternates with several contrasting ones. Throughout, Gershwin calls for bravura playing from the pianist. The entire work ends with a “grandioso” return of the main theme from the opening movement.

With each successive classical composition, Gershwin further honed his skills as an accomplished composer. In his view, the two musical worlds of popular and classical were not mutually exclusive, and he gained his greatest satisfaction by composing music that appealed to audiences in both spheres. The Concerto in F represents a high point in the merger of European sensibilities with the freedom, rhythmic excitement, and improvisational bravado of jazz, and with the broad appeal of American popular musical theater. We can only imagine what Gershwin might have achieved in classical music had he lived longer. Nevertheless, his work represents a giant step toward the creation of a distinctively American classical tradition.

Dvořák – Symphony No. 9 (From the New World)

Though celebrated in his native Czechoslovakia, Antonin Dvořák attracted little attention elsewhere until 1874 when he came to the attention of Johannes Brahms. With Brahms’ influence and support, Dvořák’s European career was launched, and his fame began to spread. This newfound celebrity brought the composer exciting opportunities, such as the one he received in 1891 when he was asked to serve as the director of the New York Conservatory of Music in New York City. Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, the conservatory’s founder, wanted an international figure to add prestige to her institution. She also assumed that Dvořák, who as a nationalist had worked to establish Czech cultivated art music in his own country, would help to foster nationalistic tendencies among students in New York. Thurber believed that a nation should cultivate its own unique music – an unusual stance when the prevailing attitude was that all cultured art, especially music, came from Germany or Italy. Dvořák initially refused the offer but was persuaded by his wife, who felt that the annual salary of $15,000 (about 20 times his current income) was too good to pass up. He was to receive this stipend, along with four months’ summer leave, in exchange for three hours of daily teaching and six annual concerts.

Arriving in America in 1892, Dvořák found the Conservatory to be remarkably progressive for the time. It was a non-profit organization that charged fees only to those who could afford to pay, and actively recruited women and people of color as students. In a letter to a friend he wrote: “There is more than enough material here and plenty of talent. I have pupils from as far away as San Francisco. They are mostly poor people, but at our Institute teaching is free, anybody who is really talented pays no fees! I have only eight students at present, but some are very promising.”

As Mrs. Thurber had hoped, Dvořák encouraged his students to evolve a distinctly American style of expression and urged them to search out folk songs and other American sources as inspiration for their own music. In an interview with Harper’s Magazine he said:
“These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American. They are the folk songs of America, and your composers must turn to them. In the Negro melodies of America I discovered all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. The United States has already surpassed so many others in marvelous inventions and feats of engineering and commerce, and has made an honorable place for itself in literature. So it must assert itself in other arts, especially music.”

Perhaps in an effort to show Americans how they might use their native materials to create national music, Dvořák offered as a model his most important and widely accepted American work, the Ninth Symphony, *From the New World*. The first sketches of the symphony were made in December 1892, and the score was completed the following May.

Much has been made about the American elements in the symphony and it is all too easy to interpret the work as Dvořák's attempt to sound American. However, upon closer examination it is apparent that the American elements and influences are, in fact, somewhat limited. The principal theme of the first movement bears some resemblance to a minstrel song, *Little Alabama Coon*, that was popular at the time; on the flute motif in the same movement may have been derived from *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. The famous English horn solo in the second movement was, for years, erroneously thought to be a Negro spiritual, though little evidence has been found to support this claim. It could have been drawn from another minstrel song, *Massa Dear*. (The melody was popular enough that it was later turned into an ersatz spiritual, *Goin' Home*, by one of Dvořák's pupils, William Fisher. Fisher himself said about the tune: “The *Largo*, with its haunting English horn solo, is the outpouring of Dvořák's own home-longing. It is a moving expression of that nostalgia of the soul all human beings feel.” A brief passage in the fourth movement slightly resembles *Yankee Doodle*. Otherwise, there is little that can be easily identified as American. With this in mind, it is important to remember that the title of the work is *FROM The New World*, and that it is the work of a slightly homesick Bohemian looking back longingly to his native land. Thus, while the composer certainly internalized elements of his foreign experience and paid tribute to such in the Symphony, it should not be viewed as Dvořák's ode to America. The themes utilized in crafting the work are just as similar to Czech or Bohemian folk music as they are to anything uniquely American, and it is probable many of them came from Dvořák's own music tradition. “I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of Negro and Indian music and, using these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythm, harmony, and orchestral color.”

The opening movement begins with a slow introduction, which gradually evolves into the main theme – a distinctive motif that will appear, in one form or another in every movement of the symphony. This bold melody is first heard in the horns, and then expanded by the strings. [Claims that this theme is based on American Indian songs have been proved false.] Two contrasting melodies are soon introduced: a dancelike minor-key tune played by the oboe, and a somewhat brighter theme heard on the flute.

The two middle movements were, according to Dvořák, inspired in part by passages from Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, which he had read years earlier in a Czech translation. The slow movement, with its famous melody, was suggested by the funeral of Minnehaha, but at the same time Dvořák instilled a deep strain of his own homesickness. The image for the third movement was the Indian dance in the scene of Hiawatha's wedding feast, but it is nearly impossible to find anything that could be considered “Indian” music in this very Czech dance.

The finale begins with a stormy introduction before the main theme enters in the brass. Following is a more lyrical melody in the solo clarinet. Dvořák develops these two themes but also brings back music from previous movements. In particular, we hear versions of the motto from the first movement, as well as a faster reading of the Largo. To conclude, a lengthy coda again brings back material from previous movements.

The premier of the Symphony at Carnegie Hall in December of 1893 was a sensational occasion. The composer received one of the greatest ovations of his career and wrote: “The success of the symphony was tremendous; the papers write that no composer has ever had such success. The people clapped so much that I had to thank them from my box like a king.”

*Program notes by Dr. Michael Vaughn.*

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 сотрудник of the orchestra
LYDIA PUI, PIANO

Hailing from Macau, LYDIA PUI, age 21, is currently a senior at Northwestern University pursuing a dual degree in piano performance and biological sciences on the pre-medical track. She currently studies piano with Dr. Sylvia Wang.

Ms. Pui has participated in numerous piano competitions and public performances in venues such as the Macau Cultural Center, the famed Musikverein in Vienna, and the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory. She has performed as the soloist with the Macau Orchestra and the Hong Kong Youth Symphonic Orchestra. She was the winner in the 2018 Young Artist MTNA (Music Teachers’ National Association) Piano Performance Competition in Illinois and the 2019 Bonnie and Lee Malmed Young Artists Competition.

Outside of her practice hours, Ms. Pui can be found in her laboratory researching genetics and genomics. She enjoys participating in community services too. In her free time, she likes to read and play board games with friends.

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ROBERT G. HASTY is the Music Director of the Kenosha Symphony Orchestra, Principal Conductor of the Highland Park Strings, and the conductor of the Chamber Orchestra and the Philharmonia at the Henry and Leigh Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University where he serves as the Associate Director of Orchestras. He is also Artistic Director of the International Schools Choral Music Society.

Dr. Hasty began his career teaching music in the public schools in Southern California. This included service as the District Music Coordinator of the Capistrano Unified School District where he supervised the K-12 music education program and its staff of 39 teachers. He also served an elected term as Vice President in charge of String Education for the Southern California School Band and Orchestra Association.

A noted researcher in music cognition, Dr. Hasty has been an author of two publications delivered at the 7th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition in Sydney, Australia. He has published a book on his research entitled: “Critical Listening While Conducting”. The European Society for Cognitive Sciences of Music invited him to speak at their conference in Portugal on these studies.

As a conductor, Dr. Hasty has appeared with the All-American College Orchestra at Walt Disney World, Beijing Youth Orchestra, Elmhurst Symphony Orchestra, Grant Park Symphony Orchestra, Irvine Youth Symphony, La Primavera Orchestra, Merit Symphony Orchestra, Metropolis Youth Symphony, National High School Music Institute Orchestra, Northwestern University Symphony Orchestra, NU Opera Theater, NU Contemporary Music Ensemble, and the Skokie Valley Symphony Orchestra. His performances have been broadcast on WFMT radio in Chicago and on the Big Ten Network. Dr. Hasty’s international engagements include the National Concert Hall of Taipei, Taiwan, the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, China, the Shanghai Oriental Arts Center Concert Hall in Shanghai, China, the Busan Cultural Center Main Theater in Busan, South Korea, and the Suzhou Culture and Arts Center Grand Theater in Suzhou, China. He is sought-after as an honor orchestra conductor, conducting honor groups across the United States. He is a member of the conducting and music education faculties at the Bienen School of Music.

Dr. Hasty also has a career as a freelance violinist and violist, having been a student of Alice Schoenfeld at the USC Thornton School of Music. Dr. Hasty was the violist on the world premiere of Kathy Henkel’s Moorland Sketches, which was broadcast on KUSC-FM Los Angeles. These days, you will find him fiddling in several Chicago clubs and venues with various local bands.

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