

Mark O'Connor - AMERICANA SYMPHONY
"Variations on Appalachia Waltz"
Program Notes

(Composed and Orchestrated by Mark O'Connor, 2006)

I. BRASS FANFARE: WIDE OPEN SPACES – This movement is a characteristic and additive variation inspired by key phrases of Appalachia Waltz for the brass and percussion of the orchestra. This opening music sets up a distinct Americana theme. With performance descriptions like “Boldly with Valour” and “Resounding,” it musically describes the spirit of the American journey, the idealism of the frontier, the Westward expansion, and the notion that a better life may lie ahead over the next hill, or over in the next hollow. The journey that so many took was dramatic because of tremendous hardship of travel, but it was the price these people were willing to pay as they sought better and richer lives in a land and time of uncertainty. I approach the more solemn aspects with dramatic shifts down in volume to the muted horns and trumpets, creating a setting for a thematic phrase to interrupt the course, and to find the hope again. This westward movement... the optimism that charged it... the personal loss that was endured... and the great prairies and mountain ranges that were the physical backdrop for the journey inspire the framework of the piece, and the Fanfare introduces this setting.

II. NEW WORLD FANCIFUL DANCE – This characteristic variation of key phrases taken from Appalachia Waltz reflects the beginning of the Appalachian communities when this area was the original melting pot of America. Names like “Melungeon Jig” listed in the score help describe both the original Appalachian people and the music so relevant to this region. The musical setting is a jig dance, an Irish inspiration. Within the movement there are different modes and temperaments this jig takes on as it seeks to reflect the various cultures of the people of Appalachia. The Irish jig reflects the characteristics of a melting pot as European, Mediterranean, African, Asian, South American influences emerge. I incorporate the musical notion of an American ideal where everyone is dancing the jig but in different ways. I envision the hills and hollows alive with folks playing their music and dancing. As a child while visiting the region and attending fiddle contests, I used to see these scenes where individual buck dancers kicked up their heels to fiddlers all across the valley. This movement depicts perhaps a more exotic life in Appalachia before the journey westward.

III. DIFFERENT PATHS TOWARDS HOME – This movement is a fugue composed with the original strict rules of fugal writing from hundreds of years ago. It is perhaps interesting that an old European composing technique can result in music

that sounds quite American. For many, the Eastern seaboard meant the discovery of the New World. It was the New World, but not yet home. Listen for a section described in the score as

“Silk Road to Appalachia.” I hear sounds of Asia in the tradition of American fiddling and folk music and suggest in the music that the Silk Road may have extended all the way to Appalachia. I imagine myself at the edge of the Eastern mountain ranges, the Appalachians, the Great Smokey Mountains, the Alleghenies and looking westward, surveying the journey ahead. The bravest set off in search of a better way of life. Some knew the hardships getting there, and many more knew they might never see their loved ones again. Many had already endured much to get to the new world, and some came to America enslaved. But the pursuit of happiness reigned, no matter the awful price. The displacement of peoples can be a key component to understanding how American music was derived. The fugue, which utilizes two phrases of the Appalachia Waltz theme, depicts both the shared journey across the plains and the different routes travelers took. The movement recalls an extraordinary time for Americans and concludes in “quiet repose.”

IV. OPEN PLAINS HOEDOWN – This movement is a characteristic variation in the form of a dance called the hoedown. The hoedown is a uniquely American musical mélange... a complex combination of reels derived from Ireland and Scotland, two hundred years of musical contributions of African-American slave fiddlers, as well as early 20th century Southeastern Bluegrass fiddlers and Texas contest fiddlers. With this movement, the hoedown creates what my score suggests as a “Swift Gallop” across the prairie. I want the listener to “see” the dust being kicked up by the wagons and horses as the prairie dogs and rabbits do their own hoedown and scurry out of the way! There is a section described in the music as “Indian Dance” that the hoedown develops suggesting the excitement and hostility in store. There is another part called “Texas Fiddle” which is the style of fiddle music I learned as a child from the great Texas fiddler Benny Thomasson. The music of the Southwest is an important cultural development in American music brought on by this Westward expansion. “Fire on the Mountain” and “Vigorously” are performance descriptions in the score to call for more energy and drive from the musicians of the orchestra. Each section of the orchestra becomes a part of the hoedown that helps convey the fleeting moments on the journey West.

V. SOARING EAGLE, SETTING SUN – The fifth variation is a canon. It takes two phrases from Appalachia Waltz and (through canonic imitation and some fugal applications) invokes the emotional journey of ascending the majestic Rocky Mountains. The movement begins in the lowest register of the basses and cellos, a processional recalling the tremendous hazards encountered on the journey so far. Now the Westward travelers face a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, the face of a

mountain. As the winds and brass join in with their echo phrases, I imagine travelers at the foothills looking forward, looking up, with their wagons, horses and others walking, trudging, plodding. The strings build section by section with percussion bells and chimes as the music scales the mountain further. The unyielding slopes broaden as the travelers reach the pinnacle and revel in their accomplishment. As many instruments play repeating notes at fortissimo, the combination of 1st violins, piccolo, flute, oboe, glockenspiel and vibraphone play the refrains of the canon subject, exemplifying the mountain's peak. One can hear the exultation. The last great obstacle to the radiant vastness of the West has been overcome.

VI. SPLENDID HORIZONS – The final movement begins with an introduction in transition from the struggle of the mountain face to the iridescent vistas seen from this vantage point. The self-determination of the homesteaders in their efforts to reach the Pacific has been unyielding and momentous. As the horns in the orchestra introduce the Appalachia Waltz theme, the feelings and memories of the journey, people and their own cultures that will stay with them are invoked. After the orchestra takes the chorus refrain of the theme to a triumphant peak, the strings take the last strains of the “A” part again. One by one, the string players fall away and discontinue playing, until at the last phrase of the piece, the trio of the violin, cello and bass are left. What the listener hears is the sound of the original piece performed by Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer and me. The orchestra joins for the final note of the melody before more motivic refrains offered by the winds, strings, brass and percussion bring a final crescendo that joyously celebrates spirit, wonder, renewed optimism and hope for a brighter future. - Mark O'Connor