

Anchorage Symphony Orchestra

Opening Night

September 22, 2018

program notes by ASO Education Consultant, Susan Wingrove-Reed



George Gershwin

Born: 1898

Died: 1937

Cuban Overture

George Gershwin dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen to play the piano to help sell sheet music in Tin Pan Alley music stores. Annotator Thomas May marveled, “By the time he was in his twenties he was an established composer with several wildly successful hit tunes and a number of Broadway shows to his credit.” The overture that opens Maestro Randall Craig Fleischer’s 20th season with the ASO was inspired by Gershwin’s 1932 vacation trip to Havana; *Of Thee I Sing* had just earned its composer the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded for a musical comedy. The Cuban vacation was pretty wild and included lavish parties hosted by celebrities like millionaire Howard Hughes. Gershwin fondly recalled there were “two hysterical weeks in Havana, where no sleep was to be had, but the quality and quantity of fun made up for that.” He eagerly soaked up the music – dance rhythms, exotic harmonies and lots of traditional percussion instruments, notably the maraca, bongos, gourds and claves.

Recharged and inspired when he returned home, he quickly wrote *Rumba*, a brilliant showpiece to add to an all-Gershwin concert by the New York Philharmonic at Lewisohn Stadium (1932). Attended by over 17,000 people, this was the first time the renowned orchestra presented an entire evening of music by a living composer; Gershwin called it “the most exciting night I have ever had.” Always seeking affirmation as a serious composer, he renamed the scintillating work *Cuban Overture* for its second performance (at the Metropolitan Opera) – saying the new title gave “a more just idea of the character and intent of the music.”

The *Cuban Overture* has three main parts. Exotic dance rhythms and lots of percussion are featured in the fast outer sections. The slower middle portion of the work provides haunting emotional contrast. A clarinet cadenza leads into the second section in which a two-voice canon (round) is developed against an unusual harmonic background. The final section revives earlier themes and the colorful work concludes with an intoxicating Cuban-influenced *rhumba*.



Michael Daugherty

Born: 1954

Tales of Hemingway

Michael Daugherty is one of the ten most performed living American composers. A critic in *The Times* of London praised his “maverick imagination, fearless structural sense and meticulous ear.” Musicologist Mark Clague revealed, “He is an avid collector of 1940-60’s Americana – autographs, books, figurines, matchbooks, movie posters and postcards... He often begins composing with improvisation and collaborates extensively with instrumentalists.”

A consortium of eight orchestras commissioned Daugherty’s *Tales of Hemingway* (2015). Zuill Bailey’s live recording with the Nashville Symphony received three Grammy awards in February, 2017 – Best Classical Compendium, Best Classical Instrumental Solo and Best Contemporary Classical Composition. The concerto is in four movements, each inspired by a Hemingway novel or short story. A reviewer at the premiere enthused, “Think wars, revolutions, bullfights, deep sea marlin fishing – basically lots of life moments on testosterone...you feel riveted lest you miss something.”

Daugherty shared, “*Tales of Hemingway* evokes the turbulent life, adventures and literature of American author and journalist Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961). His terse, direct, accessible writing style combined with mastery of dialogue and brilliant use of omission and repetition made him one of the most influential and original writers of the 20th century.

Big Two-Hearted River (Seney, Michigan, 1925) - In this story, Nick Adams is an emotionally scarred and disillusioned soldier from World War I who treks to Northern Michigan for a camping-fishing trip to try to regain control of his life. I have composed serene and passionate music that evokes a leitmotif in Hemingway’s writing: his belief that one can be healed by the power of nature through exploring isolated outdoor terrains.

For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940, Spanish Civil War) - Hemingway tells the tale of the last three days in the life of Robert Jordan, an American teacher turned demolition expert who has joined the anti-fascist Loyalist guerillas in Spain. Jordan accepts a suicide mission to blow up a bridge only to fall in love with Maria, a young Spanish woman of the Loyalist guerilla camp. The cello strums and plucks, leading the martyr’s march to battle the Fascists and to Jordan’s eventual death. As the chimes explode at the conclusion of the movement, the epitaph of the novel rings forth: “And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

The Old Man and the Sea (1952, Cuba) - In Hemingway’s Nobel Prize-winning novella, Santiago is a poor, elderly fisherman whose luck changes when he takes his small boat deep into the Gulf Stream. After an epic struggle, he catches a gigantic marlin, the largest fish of his career. As he makes the long journey home, sharks relentlessly attack his boat and devour the marlin. As a musical response, I have composed an elegy to the struggle of life and death between man and nature. The cello represents the old fisherman’s journey as he searches for the truths of man’s existence with dignity and grace.

The Sun Also Rises (1926, Pamplona, Spain) - The main character in this ground-breaking novel is Jake Barnes, bitter and wounded by war, living in Paris as an unhappy

expatriate journalist. Aimless in life, he makes a journey to the Festival in Pamplona, Spain. Along the way, he is joined by other adrift souls of the 'Lost Generation,' such as Lady Brett, a promiscuous divorcée with whom Barnes was involved before the war. For the final movement of the concerto, I have created an exciting and dramatic sound world where I imagine Jake Barnes, his entourage (and Hemingway) in Pamplona at the Fiesta, watching the running of the bulls and reveling in the spectacle of the bullfights. We also hear musical illuminations of the novel's enigmatic epigraph, 'The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose.'"



Tan Dun
Born: 1957

Passacaglia – Secret of Wind and Birds

Tan Dun is an internationally renowned composer and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. Although probably most famous for his Oscar-winning film score for “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” and the medal ceremony music for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Zaleski Stichting noted that his biography would also make a great movie plot, writing that he always wanted to be a musician but because of the Chinese Cultural Revolution “he was forced to give up his passion and work on a rice plantation. One day, a ferry carrying musicians of the Beijing Opera sank near the field in which he worked. Many members of the orchestra died. In order for the ensemble to be able to continue their tour, Tan Dun, a teenage local amateur folk musician was asked to join them as violinist and arranger. This amazing sequence of events caused his career to take off, enabling him to study in Beijing and then the United States, where he met many of the most influential composers of those times.”

His highly creative and inspiring music includes works like an Internet Symphony (commissioned by Google and heard online by over 23 million people), *Organic Music Trilogy of Water, Paper and Ceramic*, a multi-media work called *The Map* premiered by cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the Boston Symphony plus a variety of works that incorporate puppet theatre, Western and Peking Opera, and many other cultural traditions.

In 2015, the National Youth Orchestra of the United States was invited to tour China – and Carnegie Hall commissioned Tan Dun to write a composition to share on their musical journey. The imaginative, interactive piece fuses recordings of six Chinese instruments played on the cellphones of musicians and some audience members (a “poetic forest” of birds thru the traditional instruments) while the orchestra imitates bird sounds, wind and the ocean.

Tan Dun wrote, “It has always been a burning passion of mine to decode the countless patterns of the sounds and colors found in nature. Leonardo da Vinci once said, ‘In order to arrive at knowledge of the motions of birds in the air, it is first necessary to acquire knowledge of the winds, which we will prove by the motions of water.’ The way birds fly, the way the wind blows, the way waves ripple...everything in nature has already provided me with answers. With melody, rhythm and color, I structured the sounds in a passacaglia. A passacaglia is made of complex variations and hidden repetitions. In this piece, I play with structure, color, harmony, melody and texture through orchestration in eight-bar patterns. Thus, the piece begins with the sounds of ancient Chinese instruments played on cellphones, creating a chorus of digital birds and moving tradition into the future. Through nine evolving repetitions of the eight-bar patterns, the piece builds to a climax that is suddenly interrupted by the orchestra members chanting. This chanting reflects ancient myth and the beauty of nature. As it builds, it weaves finger snapping, whistling, and foot stamping into a powerful orchestral hip-hop energy. By the end, the winds, strings, brass, and percussion together cry out as one giant bird. To me, this last sound is that of the Phoenix, the dream of a future world.”

In a New York Times review, Anthony Tommassini charmingly wrote, “At a time when mobile phones are the bane of concert life, Mr. Tan turns these devices into essential

instruments. He made a recording of birdcalls played on traditional Chinese instruments and formatted the file for cellphones. At crucial moments during the piece, the players of the orchestra and selected audience members activated their phones to create “a poetic forest of digital birds’, a dense yet delicate texture of tweets and chirps.”



Ottorino Respighi

Born: 1879

Died: 1936

Ancient Airs and Dances, Suite No. 2

One of Italy's most outstanding orchestral composers, Ottorino Respighi is also renowned for his research into sixteenth and seventeenth century music. (He was at one point a student of Rimsky-Korsakov whose splendid *Capriccio Espagnol* concludes tonight's program.) In addition to some wonderful editions of old music, Respighi created marvelous original scores that translated into modern musical language the elegance, liveliness and delicacy of late Renaissance and early Baroque music. He stated, "The Italian genius is for melody and clarity. Today there is noticeable a return to the less sophisticated music of the past – in harmony to the church modes and in form to the suites of dances."

The three orchestral suites of "Ancient Airs and Dances" are based on Italian and French music for the lute, a guitar-like instrument that was used to accompany dances and singers and as a solo instrument in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Respighi chose the melodies from a collection transcribed and published by Italian musicologist Oscar Chilesotti. Suite No. 2, which consists of four dance sections, was composed in 1924. The orchestration features combinations of the following: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, harp, harpsichord (for four hands!), celesta and strings.

Laura Soave: Balletto con Gagliarda, Saltarello e Canario – The ballet *Laura Soave* was composed to honor Christena Lorena di Medici, Grand Duchess of Tuscany. Fabrizio Carosio (1531-?) composed the original lute tunes; he also wrote an important treatise on the dances. The term *saltarello* is defined as a dance faster than that which precedes it but based on the same melody. The *canario* was a sprightly dance that originated in the Canary Islands.

In *Danza Rustica*, Respighi requested that the trumpets be played muted "in imitation of old cornets." This country dance was known in France as a *Branle de village*, and in England as a *brawl*. The composer Jean Baptiste Besard (1567-1625) was a French lawyer, doctor, philosopher, author and talented lutenist.

Campanae Parisienses – Aria (composer unknown) is based on the song "Les Cloches de Paris" (The Bells of Paris). This music encases an *Aria* attributed to Marin Mersenne (1588-1648), a Franciscan monk.

Bergamesca by Bernardo Gianoncelli (active at the end of the fifteenth century) is a rustic dance based on melodies from the Bergamo district in Northern Italy. His widow published a collection of his music in 1650.



Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov

Born: 1844

Died: 1908

Capriccio Espagnol, Op. 34

Russian Rimsky-Korsakov had a lifelong love for the sea and enrolled in the St. Petersburg College for Naval Cadets when he was twelve years old. Before leaving his son at the school, his father took Nikolai to see an opera, where the boy heard an orchestra for the first time. In a letter, he wrote, “Imagine my joy, today I’m going to the theater. I shall hear the enormous orchestra and see how the conductor waves his little baton!” Rimsky-Korsakov graduated from the Naval Academy in 1856, but a passion for music had also been ignited – he packed an unfinished score for a symphony with his gear as he left for a three-year tour of ship duty. For nearly fifteen years, he combined a career in the navy with composing; he was an officer in the Imperial Russian Navy and later became a civilian inspector of naval bands. In 1871, the self-described musical amateur also became a professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he was a beloved teacher, composer and conductor.

In 1886, after visiting Spain, Rimsky-Korsakov began to write sketches for a challenging new violin concerto based on Spanish themes. The following summer, he changed his mind and decided to rewrite the work as a showcase for the entire orchestra. The composer happily recorded that the 1887 premiere of *Capriccio Espagnol* went “superlatively because the musicians liked it!” He described the exhilarating collaboration with the Imperial Russian Opera Orchestra: “At the first rehearsal, the first movement had hardly been finished when the whole orchestra began to applaud. Similar applause followed all the other parts wherever the pauses permitted. I asked the orchestra for the privilege of dedicating the composition to them. General delight was the answer.” As promised, the published score included the names of all sixty-seven players.

The composer shared, “The change of timbres, the felicitous choice of melodic designs and figuration patterns, exactly suiting each kind of instrument, brief virtuoso cadenzas for instrument solos, the rhythm of the percussion instruments, etc., constitute here the very essence of the composition and not its clothing or orchestration.” After hearing *Capriccio Espagnol*, his friend and colleague Tchaikovsky enthusiastically pronounced, “This is a colossal masterpiece of instrumentation.”

Capriccio Espagnol consists of five sections intended to be played sequentially without pause. *Alborada*, a kind of morning serenade celebrating the sun, opens with an effusive outburst for the full orchestra and ends with a section of ethereal delicacy. *Variations* opens with a mellow theme and its five exquisite variations feature a variety of soloists. *Alborada* is almost an exact repetition of the opening movement but in a new key and with different instrumentation. *Scene and Gypsy Song* features a dramatic drum roll introducing a series of virtuosic cadenzas. Violins, violas and cellos are assigned to imitate guitars (“quasi guitar”). *Fandango of the Asturias* is an Andalusian dance traditionally played by the guitar with castanet accompaniment. The major themes of the piece fuse and build to a huge conclusion. Propelled by cymbals and castanets, a final *Alborada* reappears as the exciting coda to this lush work. Annotator Paul Serotsky

gleefully concludes, “You could just relax and bathe in Rimsky-Korsakov’s intoxicating brew!”