

Program Notes

# Gershwin Porgy & Bess

February 15, 2020

## *Fanfare for the Common Man*

Aaron Copland  
1900-1990

During World War II, many conductors and music presenters commissioned composers to write inspiring works reflecting the spirit of the times. In 1942 Eugene Goossens, conductor of the Cincinnati Orchestra, commissioned several American composers to write fanfares to commemorate various aspects of the nation at war. Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* was scored for brass and percussion; the composer wrote: "[It] honors the man who did no deeds of heroism on the battlefield, but shared the labors, sorrows and hopes of those who strove for victory." The work premiered in March 1943 and is the only one of the commissioned fanfares that has remained in the repertoire. The music has seen duty for everything from national conventions to TV commercials, although without the funereal opening bass drum and timpani solos.

Not wanting a good tune go to waste, Copland reused the *Fanfare* theme to great effect as the introduction to the finale of his Symphony No. 3.

## *Voyage*

Michael Giacchino  
b. 1967

Michael Giacchino is an Oscar-winning composer for films, TV, and video games. A graduate in film making of the School of Visual Arts in New York, he took subsequently courses in composition at Juilliard and UCLA, he started his career in the Disney Interactive Division, writing music for video games.

*Voyage*, composed in 2018, is his first work for symphony orchestra. It was commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra and the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of NASA.

Giacchino, a space buff since childhood, says *Voyage* expresses "what is going through your mind when you wake up on the morning of a launch, going out to the pad, being buckled in, waiting for launch, blasting off, weightlessness, reaching your destination, and coming home."

More narrative than the music we normally associate with "space music," *Voyage* still bears a resemblance to its predecessors, particularly in its use of the orchestra. The tone painting used

for the blastoff employs the entire orchestra playing fortissimo with a lingering organ cadence à la Strauss as interpreted for the film 2001, A Space Odyssey. The delicacy of the solo harp suggests weightlessness. The lively march, also for full orchestra, conjures the sense of exhilaration of the voyage itself. The concept of an individual experiencing the voyage is symbolized by a recurrent theme that opens the works, transforms into that sense of exhilaration in space, and returns home.

***Porgy and Bess: Fantasy for Violin and Orchestra***  
**Arr. By Alexander Courage**

George Gershwin  
1898-1937

In 1923 Paul Whiteman, the self-styled “King of Jazz,” who attempted to make jazz more symphonic and more “respectable,” heard Gershwin play piano arrangements of a few of his songs. Whiteman commissioned Gershwin to write an extended jazz composition. The result was the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Its performance at the Paul Whiteman Concerts in 1924 made history. Although the critics – true to form – mostly panned it, the audience loved it. Gershwin himself played the piano part and became an instant celebrity.

Teaming up with his brother Ira as lyricist, Gershwin transformed this fame into a string of immensely successful musicals, becoming one of the most successful song and musical comedy writers on Broadway. From *Lady be Good* in December 1924 to *Let ‘em Eat Cake* in October, 1933, the opening night of a George Gershwin musical comedy was a social and media event with Gershwin himself usually leading the orchestra.

Gershwin’s ambition to write a real opera, rather than musicals, culminated in 1935 in *Porgy and Bess*, a blending of spirituals, jazz and blues, that is probably his most enduring stage work. Its gritty story of life and death in Catfish Row, one of the poor black tenements of Charleston, South Carolina, reflected Gershwin’s identification with the poor and oppressed. He stipulated that his “American folk opera” always be performed by an Afro-American cast.

The various themes from the opera quickly became popular, especially “Summertime” and “I Got Plenty O’Nuttin’.” Gershwin arranged an orchestral suite, *Catfish Row*, from the music a year later and soon after the composer’s death the violinist Jasha Heifetz arranged five of the themes for violin and piano. Other composers and arrangers followed suite.

Alexander Courage (1919-2008) was a composer and arranger, mainly for film and television. He is best remembered for the original theme song of *Star Trek*. According to violinist Joshua Bell, Courage's Fantasy arrangement is the violin concerto that Gershwin never got around to writing.

The Fantasy, arranged in 1998, contains the following excerpts from the opera:

1. *Prologue*
2. *It ain't necessarily so*
3. *I got plenty of nuttin'*
4. *My man's gone now*
5. *Summertime*
6. *There's a boat that's leavin' soon for New York*
7. *Bess, you is my woman now*
8. *Oh, Bess, oh, where's my Bess?*
9. *O lawd, I'm on my way*

***The Lark Ascending***  
**Romance for Violin and Orchestra**

Ralph Vaughan Williams  
 1872-1958

In his youth, Ralph Vaughan Williams studied the violin, an instrument he came to regard with special affection although he never fully mastered it. In 1914, considered a rising musical star just beginning work on his Second (“London”) Symphony, he expressed his love for the instrument with *The Lark Ascending*, composed for the violinist Marie Hall. The outbreak of World War I indefinitely postponed the premiere until 1920, by which time Vaughan Williams had revised and re-orchestrated it. The work takes its title from a poem of the same name by George Meredith, the following extract of which appears in the score:

*He rises and begins to round,  
 He drops the silver chain or sound,  
 Of many links without a break,  
 In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake...*

*For singing till his heaven fills,  
 `Tis love of earth that he instils,  
 And ever winging up and up,  
 Our valley is his golden cup  
 And he the wine which overflows  
 To lift us with him as he goes....*

*Till lost on his aerial rings  
 In light, and then the fancy sings.*

From its opening bars, there is a certain magic in the work. It presents the image of the soaring lark – “*the wine which overflows*” – in the non-metrical line of the solo violin against the more down-to-earth (metrically bound) orchestra – the “*golden cup*” – all in a grand musical arch.

After a few gentle introductory measures by the orchestra, the solo violin enters hesitantly with a five-note motive reminiscent of bird song that becomes increasingly complex, a gentle but full cadenza – "*And ever winging up and up.*" The violin then breaks out in a lilting melody reminiscent of English folk song, which it almost seems to “teach” the orchestra while it takes off again in more embellishments. After a return to the opening cadenza, the tempo picks up as the orchestra, led by the flute and clarinet, introduces its own animated folk-like melody, which it “teaches” the violin. During the change of pace, the violin returns to its cadenza, this time accompanied by other bird-song images by the solo winds. The work winds down with a varied reprise of the first folk melody and ends *pianissimo* as it began, with another cadenza on the violin, fading gradually – “*Till lost on his aerial rings*” – out of sight and hearing.

***La mer***  
**“Three Symphonic Sketches”**

Claude Debussy  
1862-1918

“Perhaps you do not know that I was destined for the fine life of a sailor and that it was only by chance that I was led away from it. But I still have a great passion for it,” Claude Debussy wrote to a friend at the time he began work on *La mer* in 1903. Shortly before the premiere in 1905, he commented to his publisher: “The sea has been very good to me. She has shown me all her moods.” Ironically Debussy composed most of *La mer* far from the sea in the hills of Burgundy, believing that countless recollections were worth more than “...a reality whose charm generally weighs too heavily.”

The sea itself was not his only inspiration. Together with many late-nineteenth-century painters, Debussy greatly admired Japanese art, especially the prints and drawings of Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). One print in particular, *The Hollow Wave off Kanagawa*, appealed to the composer. It portrays three boats and their terrified crews almost swallowed by a giant wave, the curve of the wave breaking into spray and foam. Debussy chose the detail of the wave as a cover for the score of *La mer*.

The three movements of *La mer* are titled Symphonic Sketches, although they approach the symphonic structures of César Franck’s Symphony in D minor as well as the symphonies of Vincent d’Indy. There are numerous memorable melodic motives, which appear in more than one movement; like the sea itself, there is an unpredictable quality in how Debussy uses them.

The first sketch, “From Dawn till Noon on the Sea,” opens with a gentle murmur on the strings and harp, portraying the usual early morning calm, eventually joined by the woodwinds. As the sea gradually awakens flexing its immense power, the brass introduce a

melodic motto that will recur at the end. Imitating the interplay of sunlight and waves, fragments of melody reappear with constant shifts of rhythm and orchestral color, reflecting the irregularity of the water's surface. Towards the end a chorale evokes the splendor of the midday sun.

The second sketch, "Play of the Waves," tosses musical fragments around until, hesitantly, the wind and the motion of the waves picks up. The water becomes choppy before subsiding again into the calm playfulness, then gradually fading away. The many solos in this movement illustrate the infinite variety of the waves. Its principal musical theme is a trill motive in the woodwinds.

"Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea" is by far the most turbulent of the three sketches and was composed during the worst period of the composer's personal troubles. The approaching storm growls ominously growing in strength, then subsiding. as if the sea is in the eye of the storm. Slowly the violence picks up again, but Debussy's storm while powerful, is never a force five gale. The main theme in this section is a surging motive in the oboes, but the movement repeats and transforms melodies from the first movement as well.

Program notes by:  
Joseph & Elizabeth Kahn  
Wordpros@mindspring.com  
www.wordprosmusic.com