

Program Notes
Written by Bill Hemminger

OVERTURE TO THE MAGIC FLUTE WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

In the last year of his short life (1756-1791) Mozart was experiencing great financial difficulty despite the many music lessons he gave, the recitals he performed, and the reams of music that he wrote. He had been given a libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder, a slightly shady actor and impresario, and decided to turn it into his last opera, *The Magic Flute*, which was the also the first work he wrote for the commercial stage. Also of interest is that the opera is a *Singspiel*, that is, a work that intersperses spoken lines with music, as well as that both Mozart and Schikaneder were Freemasons and at a time when the mysterious brotherhood was held in great suspicion. Some critics see much evidence of veiled Masonic symbolism in the opera and even in the Overture, which is written in three flats (i.e. the key of E flat) and which begins as the orchestra sustains the three notes of the tonic triad (three is a fairly magic number in Freemasonry). What follows is pure Mozart invention, however: a fugue that buzzes along until stopped by another stolid utterance of three long notes. Like the opera, the Overture blends comedy and profundity. Happily for Mozart, the opera became a great commercial success. Yet within weeks of the opera's premiere, the brilliant musical wunderkind had died.

VIOLIN CONCERTO FELIX MENDELSSOHN

Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847) was a German composer, pianist, organist, and conductor of the early Romantic period. Despite his brief life, he left behind an extensive musical corpus, which includes Italian and Scottish symphonies, the oratorio *Elijah*, piano and violin concertos, the *Songs Without Words* for piano solo, incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and much chamber music.

The Violin Concerto, one of the most well-known of Mendelssohn's compositions and indeed one of the most cherished of all works of classical music, was his last long orchestral work; it premiered in 1845 when Mendelssohn (still a young man) was conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. The concerto, which remains one of the most challenging in concert repertoire, was written for friend and concertmaster of the orchestra Ferdinand David. Despite its adherence to classical musical forms (three movements, fast-slow-fast, e.g.), the Concerto includes a number of changes to conventional musical protocol. In the first place, the concerto begins with the soloist playing as opposed to the often-lengthy orchestral introductions of earlier works. The dramatic cadenza at the conclusion of the first movement is written out, not left up to the wit or whim of the soloist. A single bassoon tone—the note B—is sustained at the end of that E minor movement, and while the remainder of the orchestra is tacit, the bassoon moves up a half-step to C, thereby introducing the lyrical second movement and its calming key of C major. Similarly, the second movement elides with the effervescent final movement, *Allegretto non troppo—Allegro molto vivace*, which hurtles to a joyous conclusion in E major. The first performance of the work was a resounding success, and the Concerto has been a favorite of virtuosos and audiences ever since.

APPALACHIAN SPRING AARON COPLAND

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Aaron Copland, 1900-1990, was a composer, teacher, writer, conductor, and popularizer of contemporary American music of his time. After musical studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, Copland returned to the US in the 1920s, hoping to establish a uniquely New World sound to American classical music. At first he experimented with jazz but then adopted—in the 1930s and 1940s—a more populist, which he called “vernacular,” style that was marked by quotations from hymns and American folk melodies and slowly changing harmonies.

Appalachian Spring is the quintessential product of this vernacular, and immensely popular, style. Copland was approached in 1942 to write a new ballet for dancer and choreographer Martha Graham. Without knowing the title of the final work, Copland set what has now become the archetypical heartland story to music; Graham later provided the name *Appalachian Spring*. Music for the entire ballet was edited in order to form a more coherent symphonic version in 1945, the same year Copland won the Pulitzer Prize for Music for this work; it is this version that is played tonight.

The opening music describes dawn on the frontier, calm and bucolic, as the characters of the ballet are introduced—the preacher, the pioneer woman, the young couple to be married, the preacher’s flock. Copland chose the Shaker tune “Simple Gifts”—which he incorporates into the ballet in a number of variations—to depict the simple, earnest lives of the young couple as they assume their lives as part of their rural, pastoral community. The concluding moments of the composition recall the dawning calm of the beginning strains.

CONCERT ROMÂNESC GYÖRGY LIGETI

Hungarian György (pronounced like the English name “George”) Ligeti, 1923-2006, was a leading proponent and composer of avant-garde music from the 1950s onward. He was born in a Hungarian-speaking pocket of Romania, and later he fled from Communist-assimilated Hungary (the Communists were not terribly receptive to new ideas, musical or otherwise) in 1956 to Austria. He has written music in all genres and styles, including his absurdist “anti-anti-opera” entitled *Le Grand Macabre* as well as the well-known music for Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (although Ligeti did not know that his work would be used in the film). Constantly reconfiguring his musical philosophy, Ligeti embraced what he called “polyrhythm” late in his life; this technique gave rise to the 18 marvelous but technically ferocious Etudes for piano, which were completed a few years before his death.

The *Concert Românesc* dates from 1951, its final revision occurring in 1996. Its harmonic vocabulary is fairly conventional, not yet the experimentation that would characterize Ligeti’s music in succeeding years. The four movements, played without break, may be considered a musical portrait of the composer’s early life in the Carpathian Mountains of Romania. Here the young Ligeti got to know polyrhythmic folk music (studied and codified by Bartók and Kodály),

local fiddling (the wildness of the concertmaster's solo suggests the amazing capability of local musicians of the time), and the music of the alpenhorn, which is featured in the third movement. Movement one of the Concert maintains a slow and relatively steady beat as meters change measure to measure. The second movement is a spritely dance; the voices of the piccolo, solo violin, and various percussion instruments are featured. The following movement is slow; horns echo, evoking the sound of the alpenhorn. The finale becomes a riotous dance.