

**HILTON HEAD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
**PROGRAM NOTES: MARCH 22, 2021 ORCHESTRA SERIES CONCERT**

**Charles Gounod – Petite Symphonie**

Charles-François Gounod was born in 1818 in Paris to artistic parents, his father a painter and his mother a pianist. His talent quickly blossomed as a teenager, inspired by attending performances of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. In 1836 Gounod was admitted to the Conservatoire de Paris and while there was awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome for his cantata *Fernand*. The prize of that award was two years of subsidized education in Rome, where he was deeply affected by the religious fervor of the city and in particular of Michelangelo's paintings and Palestrina's masses. He also met Fanny Mendelssohn and became well-acquainted with the music of her brother Felix and, subsequently, of J. S. Bach. Eventually, Gounod went on to compose numerous masses, oratorios and other religious works, but he is remembered today mostly for his operas *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*.

Gounod composed his *Petite Symphonie* for 9 wind players in 1885, the premiere also occurring that year in the Salle Pleyel in Paris. Paul Taffanel, a prominent flute player and teacher, cajoled his friend Gounod into composing the work for the Society of Chamber Music for Wind Instruments. Apparently, it was well-received for the Society performed it each season for the next five years.

Although it was conceived as a work of chamber music, the *Petite Symphonie* follows the typical tempos and structural forms of a Haydn or Beethoven symphony. It opens with a short, slow introduction with horns supplying a drone. The clarinets soon launch into the Allegretto with a joyous, bubbly theme. The slow movement is a charming, elegant Andante that features the flute performing what amounts to an opera aria. The Scherzo is effectively a tribute to every scherzo written by Mendelssohn, while the pastoral trio takes a short trip to the French countryside. The last movement is a quirky Allegretto in which the accompanying instruments always seem to be laughing in the background.

**Kurt Weill – Little Threepenny Music**

Kurt Weill was born in 1900 and grew up in Dessau, Germany, in a Jewish family. Although his musical training started rather late, by his teens he was already composing lieder. He attended the Berliner Hochschule für Musik, studying with Engelbert Humperdinck but unfortunately never graduating with a degree. Later, however, Weill studied with Ferruccio Busoni who had a strong impact on the young composer, especially in rejecting the intense romanticism and expressionism popular in Germany at the time. In 1924, Weill married the actress and singer Lotte Lenya, who championed his work especially after his death.

It was in 1928 that Weill began collaborating with Bertolt Brecht on *Die Dreigroschenoper* (The Threepenny Opera). Brecht adapted his play from the 1728 play called *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay. The original work was the most celebrated example of "ballad opera," a genre of

entertainment in Britain which lampooned actual Italian opera by using popular songs and featuring everyday characters. The adaptation title comes from a bit of narration Brecht had written for a concert version of the show:

“You are about to hear an opera for beggars. Since this opera was intended to be as splendid as only beggars can imagine, and yet cheap enough for beggars to be able to watch, it is called the Threepenny Opera.”

Although Weill composed original music for this reinterpretation of the story, he still viewed it as a satirical commentary on capitalism and Germany society in the 1920s; in short, the Weimar Republic. Weill is a master at writing charming, tuneful songs with biting, ironic lyrics, his music being a marvelous combination of early jazz and German cabaret songs. The most famous song from the show is undoubtedly “Die Moritat von Mackie Messer” or “Mack the Knife,” a song covered by numerous artists from Louis Armstrong and Bobby Darin to Michael Bublé and the Psychedelic Furs. That song opens the show and definitively sets the mood. Look for the tune tonight shortly after the suite begins – it is the first song after the overture.

Shortly after the premier in 1928, the conductor Otto Klemperer commissioned Weill to make a suite of music from the opera for a wind chamber ensemble. This was not as crazy as it might sound – during the Classical Era, composers often made suites for winds based on popular operas and Singspiels (a precursor to the modern Broadway musical). In the case of the Threepenny Opera, the original cast were actors, not trained operatic singers, and one might suppose that Weill embraced the opportunity to have his songs performed by professionals, even if they were not singers.

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