

HILTON HEAD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
PROGRAM NOTES: MARCH 8, 2021 ORCHESTRA SERIES CONCERT

Ernest Bloch – Concerto Grosso No. 1

Ernest Bloch is a lesser-known composer from the first half of the 20th Century and is fondly remembered by string players, for whom he wrote numerous wonderful pieces. Born in Geneva in 1880, he studied music at the Brussels Conservatory, which included violin lessons with the legendary Eugène Ysayë. Some of his early teaching positions include Mannes School of Music, where in 1917 he became its first teacher of composition, and the Cleveland Institute of Music, becoming its founding Director in 1920. Eventually, he became a professor at the University of California-Berkeley, from which he retired in 1952.

Bloch's music is at once modern and accessible and often reflects his Jewish heritage. Indeed, he believed the only way he could produce music of vitality and significance was to express that identity. Two of his most famous and oft-performed pieces are *Schelomo*, a rhapsody for cello and orchestra, and *Suite Hébraïque*, for viola and piano.

The *Concerto Grosso No. 1* is scored for string orchestra with a piano obbligato and was composed in 1925 as Bloch was finishing up his directorship at the Cleveland Institute. The first movement Allegro opens up with a robust series of chords in the Dorian mode, one of Bloch's favorite keys. The chords give way to melodic figures that repeat, sometimes going up in pitch, sometimes down. Bloch throws in one more unique twist as the meter constantly alternates between 4 beats and 2 beats. The second movement is titled "Dirge," but it is less "tragic funeral" and more of a dark, somber take on Baroque sequencing.

The third movement is a fun romp through two "rustic dances" interspersed with pastorale sections. The dances are reminiscent of music by British string composers like Holst and Britten while the pastorale music is marked by a distinctive bird-like filigree. The last movement is a serious and intense fugue that also features both the melodic figures and the robust chords from the first movement.

Aaron Copland – Appalachian Spring

After studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris, Aaron Copland returned to the United States excited to begin a career in composition. He found a champion for his music with Serge Koussevitzky and dabbled with both the modern style of the 1920s and the jazz style of that era. However, as America entered the Great Depression, Copland began to realize that the music he was composing was quite esoteric and thus was irrelevant to an audience struggling with life. Copland once stated:

"During the mid-1930's I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer. The old 'special' public of the modern-music concerts had fallen away and the conventional concert public continued apathetic

or indifferent to anything but the established classics. It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum ... I felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I wanted to say in the simplest possible terms."

With this new mindset and approach, Copland began composing in what would become his unique, vernacular style. Some of these early pieces include *El Salón México*, *Quiet City*, and the film score for *Of Mice and Men*. Also part of this new straight-forward style were the ballet scores for *Billy the Kid*, written for the co-founder of the New York City Ballet Lincoln Kirstein, and *Rodeo*, written for the prominent choreographer Agnes de Mille.

In 1942, Martha Graham, an innovative dancer and choreographer, and Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a prominent patron of music, commissioned Copland to compose music for a ballet with "an American theme." The title *Appalachian Spring* was suggested by Graham and was taken from the poem "The Dance" by Hart Crane. The actual title was not set until just before the premier and Copland always found it amusing when people would tell him how well he captured the beauty and the feel of the Appalachian Mountains, when he never had that on his mind!

The story involves a young couple who are about to get married and create a life for themselves on the Pennsylvania frontier. There is an older "Pioneer Woman," initially performed by Graham, who oversees the ceremony and the building of a farmhouse. The fourth principal character is an itinerant preacher who gives a stirring sermon before marrying the "Wife" and "Husbandman."

The ballet was premiered on October 30, 1944, in the Library of Congress. It featured a chamber ensemble consisting of: flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano, and pairs of strings (but only one double bass). Shortly after, conductor Artur Rodzinski asked Copland to create a symphony suite, which he did in 1945, leaving out about 10 minutes of music. In 1954, Eugene Ormandy asked Copland to go back to the complete ballet score and flesh it out for full orchestra. Finally, in 1972 the publisher Boosey and Hawkes decided to take the suite and adapt it for the original 13 player ensemble, which is the version we will be performing on March 8.

If that were not enough versions of the piece, there are still two more! Arguably, the most famous and beloved section of *Appalachian Spring* is the set of variations based on the tune "The Gift to Be Simple," which Copland found in a collection of Shaker melodies. This well-known hymn was composed by Joseph Brackett, an Elder in the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, around 1848. The tune has been so popular that Copland made a stand-alone arrangement of *Variations on a Shaker Melody* for band in 1958 and orchestra in 1967.

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