

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks
Schubert's Symphony No. 9
Jan 18 - 20

WILLIAM GRANT STILL (1895-1978)

POEM FOR ORCHESTRA

Duration: ca. 14 minutes

When William Grant Still died 40 years ago, he left more than 150 compositions, including his groundbreaking *Symphony No. 1*, which you may have heard on the last TFO Masterworks program. Since its premiere in 1930, the symphony has evolved into one of the most-performed orchestral works by an African-American composer, and stands as a milestone in the cultural heritage of our country.

Still knew what audiences like, and blended traditional European styles with American spirituals, blues and folk music. His music has been described as transparent and, above all, honest. At a time when African Americans were very much a minority in classical music, his accomplishments are all the more striking. He was the first African-American composer to conduct a major orchestra, and the first to have a symphony *and* a grand opera performed by leading U.S. ensembles. Quite an impressive achievement for a humble, soft-spoken man from Woodville, Miss., who thought the world of classical music just might fit his aspirations.

Anyone who explores the world of Still may agree that his best works speak in a truly American voice. This includes his 10-minute *Poem for Orchestra*, written in 1944 as a reflection on the violence and despair of a world war raging into its fifth year.

Unlike the ebullience that permeates his *Symphony No. 1*, the *Poem* opens in catharsis, the orchestra full of inner agitation, as if trying to find a tonal center. This may be the influence of the radical composer Edgard Varese, whom Still studied under at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, along with George Chadwick, a representative of the Second New England School of American composers.

Chadwick's conservatism might have crept into the work's middle section, with its cinematic, dream-like quality — illuminated by one of Still's finest melodies. The *Poem's* final minutes are as lush as anything Rachmaninoff wrote, but soon struggle to resolve something unspoken and uncertain. Listeners are left with Still asking a question rather than offering an answer.

Although Still called his *Poem* a purely abstract piece of music, without reference to a story line, his wife, Verna Arvey, said it was “inspired by the concept of a world being reborn spiritually after a period of darkness and desolation.” Arvey said her husband based his ideas loosely on these words:

*Soul-sick and weary,
Man stands on the rim of a desolate world.
Then from the embers of a dying past
Springs an immortal hope.
Resolutely evil is uprooted and thrust aside;
A shining temple stands
Where once greed and lust for power flourished.
Earth is young again, and on the wings of its re-birth
Man draws closer to God.*

MASON BATES (1977-)

CELLO CONCERTO

Duration: ca. 25 minutes

Professional orchestras for years have focused on younger audiences, the future ticket buyers needed to keep these important cultural assets afloat. Making the job easier are emerging composers who not only understand what appeals to these listeners, but who add vital new works to the orchestral repertoire.

Consider the case of Mason Bates. His club/classical project *Mercury Soul* is transforming commercial dance venues into hybrid musical events, and his opera *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* is one of the best-selling productions in the history of the Santa Fe Opera. His symphonic music has gained a large audience by infusing social media and electronic sounds, and he has been praised for helping move the symphony orchestra into the digital age and dissolving the boundaries of classical music. Bates recently was honored as the first composer-in-residence of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and *Musical America* named him the 2018 Composer of the Year.

That's a full plate for the 41-year-old Virginia native, called the most-performed composer of his generation. Making the rounds to help secure that distinction is his *Cello Concerto*, which has been played frequently since its premiere by the Seattle Symphony, with soloist Joshua Roman, in 2014. When TFO Music Director Michael Francis first heard the piece, he wanted to bring it home.

"This is music in a real American language," he said. "And it uses rhythms in such a powerful and imaginative way. I'm excited we're doing it here."

Roman will be at the cello in his TFO debut, and he shares the conductor's excitement in presenting the *Concerto* to Tampa Bay audiences.

"I've played it with 12 orchestras now, and five times this season," Roman said. "It's absolutely beautiful music and it's so much fun to play."

The 25-minute work is abstract and follows no narrative. Cast in three movements, it opens with a plaintive melody that floats over a restless orchestra, moves into a lyrical and emotional slow movement, and ends in a blaze of virtuosity — with the cellist at one point trading his bow for a guitar pick. Bates blends the blues into his harmonies, as well as his interest in electronic music, which add a driving pulse to the rhythms.

Like most professional cellists, Roman has played the standards, especially the Dvorak *Cello Concerto*, and treats all the works he performs as having been “new” music at one point. But the difference between a Dvorak and a Bates is only one guy can answer the phone and chat it up.

“If I have a question about the (Bates) *Concerto*, I can just text or call him,” Roman said. “You get to know the composer and ask him things and get a sense of his personality and how he’s connected to the music. With Dvorak, it’s all guesswork because he’s not around. I can’t play a passage for him and ask what he thinks.”

For Roman, this accessibility to living composers also deepens his respect for those of the past: “I feel very lucky to be working with today’s composers, and it makes me feel much more connected to Beethoven and Brahms and Dvorak.”

Bates and Roman are close friends, and when the composer first heard the young cellist play, he was taken aback by an unusual combination of “enlightened prodigy and everyman approachability ... unmatched musicianship and technique,” according to the composer’s own program notes. He was a natural to represent and interpret the *Concerto* around the world. “I love the fact that my debut with TFO is doing the work of a close friend,” Roman said. “These performances are really an expression of that friendship.”

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828)

SYMPHONY NO. 9 IN C MAJOR

Duration: ca. 50 minutes

Imagine, if you will indulge in whimsy for a moment, what glories of music would fill our concert halls had Mozart not died at such a young age. The same for Mendelssohn, Bizet and Gershwin, who passed much too soon, leaving us to ponder masterpieces that might have been — or changed the course of music history.

Schubert seemed almost prescient about his short life, judging from the sheer output of compositions — nearly 1,500 — in his 31 years. This enormous cache includes 600 songs; 40 liturgical pieces; 20 piano sonatas; 15 string quartets; nine symphonies; and music for the stage.

To say Schubert could write a tune is an understatement. He spun music like silk on a loom, organically melodic, melancholy and introspective. Some works, like his *Unfinished Symphony*, are so profound they seem to have been forged in a great furnace deep within the earth. Aware of his fate, Schubert composed music as romantic love songs about death, but spontaneous and clear. Few musicians have ever matched his gift of pure, poetic expression. If you need a nudge, just listen to the slow movement of the *C Major Quintet*.

It may have seemed bizarre to his friends that such angelic sounds could come from a shy, often sick, diminutive man, whom they called “little mushroom.” In the words of his childhood friend Franz Eckel, Schubert lived in a world “of inner, spiritual thought, seldom expressed in words but almost entirely in music.”

Few of Schubert’s works were published or widely known in his lifetime, and he did little to promote himself. Only one public concert devoted to his music was known to be staged while he was alive, and his aversion to public appearances may be why he never wrote a concerto: If he did, he would have to serve as soloist.

Writing symphonies left him free of such intimidations, even though he never lived to hear the sound of his finest large-scale creation, the *Symphony No. 9*, aptly known as the *Great*. In fact, you and everyone else sitting here tonight might not have heard it either, if not for the good luck of composer Robert Schumann, who happened to come across the score in a pile of papers a decade after Schubert's death. Knowing its significance, Schumann shared it with Felix Mendelssohn, who in 1840 gave the world premiere with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

This is a long symphony, clocking in at about 50 minutes, depending on a conductor's approach to tempo. But its "heavenly length," as Schumann said about the slow movement, along with the rhythmic energy of the surrounding sections, make length irrelevant. "It transports us into a world," Schumann said, "where we cannot recall ever having been before." Its grand structure and innovative orchestration left Haydn and Mozart behind and helped pave the way — with a little help from Beethoven — for the new, grander age of romanticism.

The symphony opens with a stentorian horn call that heralds a pensive introduction on which the entire work is built — one of the mightiest sonata movements in all of music. Schubert develops and redevelops his ideas through "choirs of instruments" and concludes with a glorious coda that sets up the slow movement in A minor, where lyricism creeps alongside an undertow of tension. Notice how the plaintive tune sung by the woeful oboe keeps getting interrupted by outbursts from the full orchestra.

In the third movement, Schubert discards the traditional minuet with a Beethoven-like scherzo so bold and incisive it seems cut from marble. The finale summarizes the tonal complexities of and key schemes of the opening movement and charges forward with relentless energy. This section is so full of technical pitfalls that some befuddled 19th-century orchestras had to stop playing. Schubert brings all the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic bits and pieces from the preceding movements to an exhilarating close in the radiant key of C major.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.