



PROGRAM NOTES

VPR Broadcast Friday, August 28, 2020, 6:00 PM Eastern

JOHANNES SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Schafe können sicher weiden (Sheep May Safely Graze) from Hunting Cantata, BWV 208 (1713)

One of Bach's greatest hit tunes, *Sheep May Safely Graze* has attracted centuries of arrangers. YouTube lists scores of versions, and if you want, you can even head to New York City at Christmas to hear it played by hundreds of tubas at Rockefeller Center. But the serene beauty of the piece is best heard in this version by Egon Petri, a Dutch/German pianist who studied with the master of Bach transcription, Ferruccio Busoni.

As a birthday gift from Bach's Weimar employer to a neighboring prince who loved to hunt, the Cantata deals mostly with the thrill of the chase. But when Bach spotted an offhand line in the text observing that sheep may safely graze when watched over by a good shepherd (read: *wealthy prince*), he sensed a major opportunity and set the flattering line memorably. The prince fell for it and commissions followed.

Note how Petri's transcription brilliantly captures the interweaving multiple voices of the original choral setting. A feat to transcribe; a feat to play with sensitive voicing. When Leon Fleisher returned to Carnegie Hall after long years of working to recover full use of his hands, he played both this deceptively simple transcription and the dazzling Kirchner left hand-only piece. The *New York Times* reviewer summed up the concert by saying: at the end one wanted to run up and shake both hands.

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LEON KIRCHNER (1919-2009)

L.H. For Piano Left Hand (1995)

Leon Kirchner, pianist, conductor, composer, and teacher, started with Bartók and Stravinsky but soon came under the lasting influence of Schoenberg, his mentor at the University of California. In spite of later study with Roger Sessions, he remained identified with the aesthetics of the Second Viennese School, even though he did not adopt the rigors of 12-tone composition. During nearly thirty years teaching at Harvard he influenced generations of students, including John Adams and Yo-Yo Ma. His quartets chart his evolving style: jazzy and lyrical in Bartók's harmonic idioms, then steeped in Schoenberg, finally winning a Pulitzer for a restless episodic piece incorporating electronic tape sounds.

With this left-hand piece — written for Leon Fleisher, a personal friend undergoing the agony of a dysfunctional right hand — Kirchner relishes the challenge of writing for a celebrated virtuoso, disguising his limitations. All the hallmarks of his mature style are here. With constant time-signature changes and a floating tonality, he seems to anchor his modern voice in the Romantic tradition. The sweeping virtuoso writing creates a sense of organic growth without relying on thematic recognition. Rhythm and chromaticism create the aural impression of melodic activity.

“Our consciousness is rooted in reflections of the past,” Kirchner wrote. “As composers we move into, and test, unknown paths. We are able to extend ourselves into the future because of the balance established in historical precedent.” Often dismissive of post-Modernist music, especially Minimalism, Kirchner spoke out strongly about purely cerebral composers who turned music into science. “Music is a science,” he said, “but a science that must make people laugh and dance and sing.”

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RICHARD DANIELPOUR (b. 1956) String Quintet, *A Shattered Vessel* (2019)

Commissioned by LCCMF, the Kennedy Center, Music from Angel Fire, Linton Chamber Music, Curtis Institute of Music, and CM Monterey Bay

My intention to compose a string quintet, (with two cellos) is born out of the desire to compose a work that is a 21st-century companion to the great Schubert *Quintet in C*, one of the last works completed by the great master. While I hope to compose a great any works flowing this one, I wanted to write a piece that reflected many of the same issues that are in the Schubert *Quintet* – vulnerability, loss, and an immense appreciation for life itself in the face of our own mortality. The four-movement work is around 24 to 26 minutes depending on the tempos that are taken. I’m particularly pleased with the two lyrical movements, the second and the fourth (last) respectively. I feel that pairing this with the Schubert *Quintet*, while a little bit intimidating, is probably the absolute right thing to do, since there are echoes of Schubert, quite subtly placed but not always intentionally, throughout the piece.

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FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797-1828) Auf dem Strom, D. 943 (1828)

Auf dem Strom (On the River) was written by the ingenious song composer Franz Schubert in March 1828. With the performance of this piece and other works at a concert promoting his music, Schubert reached the peak of his popularity in his career. Shortly thereafter, Schubert’s life tragically ended in November 1828.

The piece is a five-part rondo form based on a five-verses poem written by Ludwig Rellstab. Beginning with a melodic intro, the piano lays down a texture that symbolizes a flowing current, while the horn sets a wistful and melancholy tone. Each verse is preceded by a duet played by the horn and the piano.

The first verse starts with a beautifully lyrical theme that turns to a different mood at “already the boat is pulled away.” This turn then leads to the second verse in a minor key as the tenor sings the words “and so the waves bear me away,” creating an enchantingly effective contrast to the intense driving music of the piano. When the refrain theme returns at the end, it recalls the second verse by setting the piano back in a marching texture, and alternates the key from minor to major during this time. The piece ends with a calm, yet stately, coda with the impact of the dramatic five-verse setting still lingering in the air.

This work has been cited as the first significant work by a composer for the valved horn. Although his *Nachtgesang im Walde* was likely written for a combination of natural and valved horns, the horn writing in *Auf dem Strom* is much more successful in its melodic and richly imaginative part.

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AARON COPLAND (1900-1990)

Appalachian Spring (1944)

One would be hard-pressed to identify a more “American” sounding work than Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*. Copland was in his mid-forties when he wrote the work in 1944, and he won the Pulitzer Prize for the piece. While many know the piece in its larger orchestral version, its original form was for thirteen instruments; a ballet commissioned by the great Martha Graham for a miniature orchestra that could fit into the theater’s pit. The working title for the piece was *Ballet for Martha*, but it was Graham herself who offered the title *Appalachian Spring* with inspiration from a Hart Crane poem. Alas, the piece had nothing to do with Appalachia nor Spring or springs when Copland wrote it; he was commissioned by the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation to write a piece for Graham with an “American theme” and took it from there without a title. According to the composer, the music is full of imagery from an idealized 19th century rural Pennsylvania landscape—we can imagine church services, barn-raising, and country dances all taking place in the course of the piece.

Copland’s first works of note were written in his young thirties, with a thorny and angular *Variations for Piano* standing out amongst these early pieces for its expressive and contemporary modernism. He would later take his music into a radically new direction to the simplicity and lyricism for which it is known. Copland met his greatest mentor Nadia Boulanger early on during his studies in France, and she famously encouraged him to explore the music of his own country. This exploration would eventually lead to a rich foray into the open harmonies and expansive melodies of his newly interpreted “American” sound. Copland incorporated American folk music within this so-called “vernacular style” that began with the ballet *Billy the Kid* (written six years before *Appalachian Spring*) followed by iconic works like *Rodeo*, *Lincoln Portrait*, and *Fanfare for the Common Man*.

The best-known part of *Appalachian Spring* is into the heart of the piece at the variations on a Shaker melody ‘*Tis a Gift to Be Simple*. Though it is the only direct and full quotation in the ballet, we hear many references to other folk tunes and styles woven through the music. Quotation is a practice in composition that goes back as long as there have been composers, and amongst American music the tradition came well before Copland (examples from Charles Ives and Dvorak come to mind, as well as countless adaptations of spirituals, sea shanties, and anthems found in popular music). But Copland’s use of ‘*Tis a Gift* remains the most prominent full quotation of American folk music in the concert

setting (John Williams riffed on this for his commissioned piece written for the first inauguration of President Barack Obama). It is a testament to elegance and unadorned beauty for which American traditional music is known, and Copland does nothing to complicate the tune, but rather handles it in the piece with the most gentle, gracious touch.

(There is a story about a young composer who visited Leonard Bernstein for a lesson one summer day in New York. He saw a page of music manuscript framed and hanging on the maestro's wall with what looked like simplest of notations written all over it. The composer asked: "oh, did one of your children write this?" Bernstein replied "look again..." It was the first page of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*.)

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