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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
Piano Concerto in G major

By the time that Ravel had completed his Piano Concerto in 1931, his career was nearing its end. In fact, he would finish only one further composition – the series of songs entitled *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* – before illness would end his career as a composer. Yet, since emerging as one of the leading composers among France's avant-garde at the turn of the century, Ravel had explored many different musical languages. He had worked within his own variety of Impressionism, had essentially invented Neo-Classicism, had examined his Spanish heritage, and had employed a number of exotic techniques drawn from sources as varied as Balinese *gamelan* and African-American jazz. Throughout all of this, however, Ravel had maintained a personal and distinctive style dependent upon Classical principles and rigorous organization.

The Piano Concerto in G major represents a final integration of jazz elements into Ravel's mature Neo-Classical vein. To understand this statement, one must first understand the origins of jazz as well as its arrival into France and its gradual incorporation by Ravel.

Jazz first emerged around 1900 as the result of an interaction between the four genres of popular music that predominated in America at that time. These were ragtime, a genre today most associated with Scott Joplin; blues, typified by the expressive singing of Bessie Smith; popular songs, like spirituals and those written for minstrel shows; and dance music, which was played in the increasingly popular dance halls. Each of these genres had its own profound influence on the new genre that became jazz. Ragtime brought to jazz its syncopated rhythms as well as a tension between rhythmically regular accompaniment and irregular melody. Blues influenced jazz with its emphases on improvisation and expressivity, the latter including the essential "blue notes". Popular music often provided the material for jazz as familiar songs became jazz standards. Finally, dance music often lent jazz its orchestra. Although jazz first emerged in a recognizable form in New Orleans, it soon spread throughout the United States – particularly to cities like Chicago and New York – and internationally.

Jazz first reached France in 1918 towards the end of World War I with the friendly invasion by American soldiers. Nonetheless, ragtime had already travelled to France before the war where it was favorably received. France received jazz even more enthusiastically as it provided comfort for a disillusioned people and represented a clean break with the tradition that had at least been attributed to starting the terrible war. Additionally, jazz provided an alternative to the still dominant German Romanticism that Debussy and others had begun fighting prior to the war but had been unable to entirely defeat. While the French music critics were praising jazz on paper, France's younger composers were striving to integrate it into their compositional palettes. The group known as *Les Six* was especially interested in this undertaking and one of its members Darius Milhaud was particularly successful.

Ravel too saw great potential in jazz. In the Violin Sonata he completed in 1927, Ravel made a noble attempt to integrate the conventions of jazz into his composition. Most notably, he titled its second movement "Blues" and there the violin often seems to imitate the strumming of a banjo. In 1928, he wrote an article entitled "Take Jazz Seriously" where he pleaded for jazz to be treated within the ranks of art music. Ironically, in the years between the wars, Europe treated jazz and its artists much more seriously than the American musical establishments.

When Ravel began contemplating a piano concerto in 1928, he had just returned from America where he had met George Gershwin and toured several Harlem jazz clubs. Ravel was a great admirer of Gershwin and certainly this American had been highly successful at combining jazz and classical idioms as evidenced by his already famous *Rhapsody in Blue* and his own 1925 Piano Concerto.

In 1931, after several years of work, Ravel finally completed his Piano Concerto in G major and the premiere was soon given on January 14, 1932. Ravel had originally planned to be the soloist at this concerto's premiere, but he had neither the time nor strength needed to practice the difficult part. Instead, he recruited his friend Marguerite Long to play the soloist role while Ravel himself conducted. The two followed this premiere with a demanding three-month concert tour which certainly did not help to improve the composer's declining health.

The concerto is divided into three movements in the traditional fast-slow-fast format. The opening *Allegramente* is initiated by a whip before the piccolo introduces the playful first theme. The piano often contributes bluesy melodies that sound almost improvised while the brass adds bombastic shrieks similar to that of a dance hall orchestra. Throughout this movement, Ravel manages to flawlessly stitch together the disparate elements of jazz, the carnivalesque, and an impressionistic lyricism.

In the slow second movement marked *Adagio assai*, this lyricism becomes even more pronounced. Here more than anywhere else, this movement music justifies Ravel's claim that he had studied the piano concerti of Mozart and Saint-Saëns when writing his own concerto. In this movement, the listener hears the same clarity and softness that often informs the works of these predecessors within this shared medium.

The jazz elements that pervaded the first movement return full-force in the accelerated finale. Marked *Presto*, this movement is dominated by motor rhythms and energetic syncopation. Here, the woodwinds screech, the trombone slides, and the trumpets mutedly make their own contributions. Full of wit, this movement ends the concerto on a cheerful note.

All of this does a great deal to distance Ravel's Concerto from the Romantic piano concerti of the previous century. Ravel once wrote that "the music of a Concerto should, in my opinion, be light-hearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects." By fusing jazz elements into his personal Neo-Classical vein, Ravel achieved just this.

George Walker (Born 1922)
Icarus in Orbit

Winner of the 1996 Pulitzer Prize in Music, George Walker was the first African-American composer to receive this honor. While this prize was awarded for his work *Lilacs* for voice and orchestra, it more importantly confirmed Walker's place among America's most significant living composers. Even though his compositions had been critically acclaimed for decades and many important commissions had been asked from him, his name was still largely unknown to the listening public. Since winning the Pulitzer, however, Walker has finally received the recognition that he had deserved for many years.

George Theophilus Walker was born in 1922 in Washington, D. C. He began studying music early in life and, by the time he was 18, had entered the Curtis Institute to continue these studies. There, his teachers included the famous pianist Rudolf Serkin with whom he studied piano and Rosario Scalero whose other composition students included Samuel Barber. Thanks to a Fulbright Fellowship, Walker travelled to France to study privately with Nadia Boulanger, the renowned teacher of many of America's most prominent composers including Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, and Philip Glass.

Walker has led an impressive career not only as a composer but also as a teacher and as a concert pianist. He has won numerous awards and his work *Lyric for Strings* is among the most often performed pieces of orchestral music by a living American composer.

Icarus in Orbit dates from 2002. The piece was written as a commission by the New Jersey Youth Orchestra to celebrate their 25th anniversary.

As the work's title suggests, *Icarus in Orbit* retells through music the familiar Greek myth of Icarus and his failed attempt at flight. In this tale, the hero's father Daedalus crafts wings from wax and feathers for him and his son Icarus to escape their imprisonment upon an island. Although Daedalus warned Icarus not to fly too close to either the sun or the sea, Icarus forgets these orders when he becomes so excited that he is actually flying. When his flight passes too close to the sun, its heat melts the wax and Icarus goes crashing into the sea.

A tone poem, *Icarus in Orbit* captures each of these actions through music. With its loud, pounding opening, the listener might perceive the initial imprisonment of Icarus and the despair that this situation creates for the protagonist. Or perhaps, one will hear the slow flapping of the gigantic wings as Icarus anxiously takes flight for the very first time. Soon, faster and lighter music accompanies Icarus' flight as his excitement builds thanks to the initial success and his emerging confidence. As time progresses, however, the music echoes that things have begun to go wrong and that Icarus is now plummeting. The flute solo towards the end is particularly revealing of the hero's tragic fall. A final orchestral outburst details his crash.

Alexander Miller (Born 1968)
Let Freedom Ring

Assistant Principal Oboe at the Grand Rapids Symphony in Michigan, Alexander Miller has also been called this orchestra's "unofficial composer-in-residence." Since joining the orchestra in 1992, most of his orchestral works have been premiered if not also commissioned by this group.

Born in Michigan in 1968, Alexander Lamont Miller spent much of his youth abroad. In fact, he has credited his acceptance of a wide variety of different kinds of music to these travels. Although he returned to Michigan as a teenager, he would leave once more when, in 1986, he journeyed to New York to study oboe at the Juilliard School. There, he pursued both his Bachelor's and his Master's degrees. Although the school's composition program is well-known, Miller never

officially pursued a degree in composition. Nonetheless, he managed to learn plenty from the renowned faculty and was the only student not officially enrolled in the composition program whose works were allowed to be played at the Composer's Forum concerts.

After receiving his Master's from Juilliard, Miller returned to Michigan to join the Grand Rapids Symphony. As an oboist, he has also played several times under the baton of the highly praised Marin Alsop and has, in the past, performed at the Aspen Music Festival. As a composer, he has written several well-received works. Besides *Let Freedom Ring*, the compositions *Fireworks* and *Remix in D* are perhaps his most notable. Dating from 2004, *Fireworks* has been called by the Grand Rapids Press "a worthy companion to the pieces by Stravinsky and Ravel." Meanwhile, *Remix in D* of 2009 reinterprets Pachelbel's famous *Canon in D* for a contemporary audience; one critic was so impressed that he declared *Remix* worthy of Copland or Philip Glass. Recently, Miller has had to struggle against a rare brain tumor, although it has proven manageable so far. Despite these severe health issues, he has nonetheless continued to perform and compose.

Let Freedom Ring for orchestra and narrator was composed in 1997 to be premiered the following year by the Grand Rapids Symphony during their ten annual fifth grade concerts. The piece serves to musically illustrate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech "I Have a Dream." While the narrator reads some of the most memorable sections of this speech, the orchestra accompanies these readings and then comments upon them after they have been read. As a tribute to Martin Luther King and his accomplishments, this composition has been performed many times over the last decade and has seen a number of celebrities fulfilling the role of its narrator. Former President Bill Clinton, James Earl Jones, Danny Glover, and William Warfield are among the most prominent. The composition's depictive use of musical imagery, its propelling energy, and its accessible language have also helped spread the work's popularity.

George Gershwin (1898-1937)
Robert Russell Bennett (1894-1981)
Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture

George Gershwin achieved a unique synthesis of the classical, popular, and jazz idioms that pervaded all of his compositions whether written for the concert hall or the Broadway stage. In studying the classical piano repertoire as a child – which interestingly introduced him to the music of Ravel – and in working as a song plugger on Tin Pan Alley as a young man, Gershwin encountered all types of music and translated these varied influences into his own equally all-inclusive compositions. Although he began his compositional career writing Broadway musicals, he soon expanded into the classical realm when Paul Whiteman asked him to compose *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924. Over the next decade, Gershwin found himself addressing a growing number of classical genres until he had finally arrived at opera with *Porgy and Bess*.

Gershwin began work on his opera in February 1934 and its premiere occurred on September 30th of the following year. For this project, George once more partnered with his brother Ira as his librettist, although this time Ira was accompanied by DuBose Heyward. Heyward had been the author of the 1925 novel *Porgy*, which had inspired the Gershwin brothers to attempt an operatic adaptation. The plot revolves around several African-American characters living in Catfish Row, a fictitious neighborhood of Charleston, South Carolina. During the course of the opera, its protagonist, a crippled beggar named Porgy, attempts to rescue his lover Bess from her uncaring husband Crown and the local "dope peddler" Sportin' Life. Although it took until the 1980s to be recognized as a legitimate opera, *Porgy and Bess* has become a vital part of the American repertoire.

The version presented on today's program is an orchestral arrangement by Robert Russell Bennett. Although a prolific composer himself, Bennett is better remembered as Broadway's leading orchestrator for the five decades spanning the 1920s through the 1960s. His *Symphonic Picture* remains the standard orchestral adaptation of *Porgy and* Bess. Arranged in 1942 as a commission from the conductor Fritz Reiner, this *Symphonic Picture* even surpasses in popularity the suite that Gershwin himself had arranged soon after the opera's premiere. Although the orchestration is perhaps not as jazzy as in Gershwin's original, Bennett's version portrays many of the opera's most memorable tunes just as colorfully. These tunes include not only the bluesy "Summertime" and the folksy "I Got Plenty of Nuttin'", but also the equally familiar "It Ain't Necessarily So" and "I Loves You Porgy."

Porgy and Bess represents the final phase of the synthesis that Gershwin had been constructing through the course of his career. As a genuine opera, it is sung throughout and employs the traditional aria-recitative formula; yet, as one would expect from Gershwin, the songs are as readily accessible and as memorable as any of the popular songs composed for his many jazz-inspired musicals.