Milwaukee Symphony

Musical Journeys

WEEKLY STREAMING PROGRAMS

Episode 12 Notes

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Born 11 May 1895; Woodville, Mississippi
Died 3 December 1978; Los Angeles, California

Poem for Orchestra

Composed: 1944
First performance: 7 December 1944; Cleveland, Ohio

Known as the "Dean of African-American composers," William Grant Still penned over 150 works, including eight operas and five symphonies. Until the 1950s, the *Afro-American Symphony*, one of his best-known works, was the most frequently performed symphony written by an American. Born in Mississippi, he grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas and received his college education in Ohio – first at Wilberforce University and later at Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

His *Poem for Orchestra* was written for the Cleveland Orchestra during World War II, on a commission from the Kulas American Composers' Fund. Rudolph Ringwall conducted its premiere on the third anniversary of the Pearl Harbor bombing.

According to Verna Arvey – librettist, pianist, writer, and Still's wife – this symphonic *Poem* was "inspired by the concept of a world being reborn spiritually after a period of darkness and desolation." Though the opening of the piece is dark, foreboding, and dissonant, Still's formidable melodic gifts are always at the forefront. As the music unfolds, we experience a journey from darkness into light. The final sonority is left unresolved, however. It's a strong reminder that Still, writing in 1944, was focused on hopes, not certainties.

JULIA PERRY

Born 25 March 1924; Lexington, Kentucky
Died 29 April 1979; Akron, Ohio

Short Piece for Orchestra

Composed: 1965
First performance: 7 May 1965; New York, New York

The Kentucky-born, Ohio-raised composer Julia Amanda Perry boasted an impressive musical pedigree: bachelor's and master's degrees from Westminster Choir College, with further study at Juilliard and Tanglewood; two Guggenheim scholarships allowed her to study, in 1952 and 1954, with Luigi Dallapiccola in Florence and with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. A prolific composer by any standards, across her relatively short life, she completed 12 symphonies, two concertos, three operas, and numerous smaller pieces. Her music was largely neoclassical, but also experimented with dissonance.

Perry's Short Piece displays her complete mastery of orchestral writing. She creates an impressive palette of color and texture by highlighting first one instrument or section, then another, subsequently combining them in various ways. A flurry of activity opens the work, but the mood soon becomes calmer as angular melodies are tossed about the orchestra. The music grows in intensity and in the density of its contrapuntal texture, then subsides – only to return again to its busyness toward the very end. An emphatic fortissimo chord concludes the piece.

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born 25 August 1918; Lawrence, Massachusetts
Died 14 October 1990; New York, New York

Symphony No. 2, *The Age of Anxiety*

Composed: 1947-49; revised 1965
First performance: 8 April 1949; Boston, Massachusetts

Between the Broadway musical *On the Town* (1948) and the opera *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952), Bernstein wrote only one major work: *The Age of Anxiety*, a "symphony" for piano and orchestra. A taxing, virtuosic piano concerto in all but name, the piece is based on W.H. Auden's 80-page, Pulitzer Prize-winning poem. Though at the time of its premiere – by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitsky, with Bernstein as soloist the composer thought it essential for the listener to have read Auden's verses, Bernstein biographer Humphrey Burton believes the composer "was seduced by his admiration for Auden into overstating his debt to the poem."

Be that as it may, the composer called it "fascinating and hair-raising… one of the most shattering examples of pure virtuosity in the history of the English language," and gave an extensive explanation of the work in the published score:

The essential line of the poem (and of the music) is the record of our difficult and problematic search for faith. In the end, two of the characters enunciate the recognition of this faith – even a passive submission to it – at the same time revealing an inability to relate to it personally in their daily lives, except through blind acceptance.

No one could be more astonished than I at the extent to which the programmaticism of this work had been carried out. I was merely writing a symphony inspired by a poem and following the general form of that poem. Yet, when each section was finished I discovered, upon re-reading, detail after detail of programmatic relation to the poem. Since I trust the unconscious implicitly, finding it a sure source of wisdom and the dictator of the condign in artistic matters, I am content to leave these details in the score.

I have divided Auden's six sections into two large parts, each containing three sections played without pause. A brief outline follows:

Part One

(a) *The Prologue* finds four lonely characters, a girl and three men, in a Third Avenue bar, all of them insecure, and trying, through drink, to detach themselves from their conflicts, or, at best, to resolve them. They are drawn together by this common urge and begin a kind of symposium on the state of man. Musically the Prologue is a short section consisting of a lonely improvisation by two clarinets, echo-tone, and followed by a long descending scale which acts as a bridge into the realm of the unconscious, where most of the poem takes place.

(b) *The Seven Ages*. The life of man is reviewed from the four personal points of view. This is a series of variations which differ from conventional variations in that they do not vary one common theme. Each variation seizes upon some feature of the preceding one and develops it, introducing, in the course of the development, some counter-feature upon which the next variation seizes. It is a kind of musical fission, which corresponds to the reasonableness and almost didactic quality of the four-fold discussion.

(c) *The Seven Stages*. The variation form continues for another set of seven, in which the characters go on an inner and highly symbolic journey according to a geographical plan leading back to a point of comfort and security. The four try every means, going singly and in pairs, exchanging partners, and always missing the objective. When they awaken from this dream-odyssey, they are closely united through a common experience (and through alcohol), and begin to function as one organism. This set of variations begins to show activity and drive and leads to a hectic, though indecisive, close.

Part Two

(a) *The Dirge* is sung by the four as they sit in a cab en route to the girl's apartment for a nightcap. They mourn the loss of the "colossal Dad," the great leader who can always give the right orders, find the right solution, shoulder the mass responsibilities, and satisfy the universal need for a father-symbol. This section employs, in a harmonic way, a twelve-tone row out of which the main theme evolves. There is a contrasting middle section of almost Brahmsian romanticism, in which can be felt the self-indulgent, or negative, aspect of this strangely pompous lamentation.

(b) *The Masque* finds the group in the girl's apartment, weary, guilty, determined to have a party, each one afraid of spoiling the other's fun by admitting that he should be home in bed. This is a scherzo for piano and percussion alone (including harp, celesta, glockenspiel, and xylophone) in which a kind of fantastic piano-jazz is employed, by turns nervous, sentimental, self-satisfied, vociferous. The party ends in anti-climax and the dispersal of the actors; in the music the piano-protagonist is traumatized by the intervention of the orchestra for four bars of hectic jazz. When the orchestra stops, as abruptly as it began, a pianino [upright piano] in the orchestra is continuing the *Masque*, repetitiously and with waning energy, as the *Epilogue* begins. Thus a kind of separation of the self from the guilt of the escapist living has been effected, and the protagonist is set free again to examine what is left beneath the emptiness.

(c) *The Epilogue*. What is left, it turns out, is faith. The trumpet intrudes its statement of "something pure" upon the dying pianino: the strings answer in a melancholy reminiscent of the *Prologue*: again and again the winds reiterate "something pure" against the mounting tension of the strings' loneliness. All at once the strings accept the situation, in a sudden radiant pianissimo, and begin to build, with the rest of the orchestra, to a positive statement of the newly recognized faith.

Throughout the *Epilogue* the piano-protagonist has taken no part, but has observed it, as one observes such development on the movie-screen, or in another human personality. At the very end he seizes upon it with one eager chord of confirmation, although he has not himself participated in the anxiety-experience leading to this fulfillment. The way is open; but, at the conclusion, is still stretching long before him.

Completing the *Epilogue* had been a struggle for Bernstein: He finished it only three weeks before the premiere. Never quite satisfied with it, in 1965 he revised the finale to include the solo pianist, even giving her a final burst of cadenza before the coda. Taken as a whole, *The Age of Anxiety* is, says biographer Burton, "one of Bernstein's most deeply felt and romantic compositions."

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.