

Reno Chamber Orchestra
A Place for Us
October 19 & 20, 2024
Nightingale Concert Hall

Malcolm Arnold

Born: October 21, 1921, Northampton, England

Died: September 23, 2006, Norwich, England

Sir Malcolm Arnold was born into a family of shoemakers, many of whom were also musicians. He studied violin and piano as a youth, but after seeing Louis Armstrong perform, chose instead to focus on the trumpet. He studied both trumpet and composition at the Royal College of Music. In 1941, he joined the London Philharmonic Orchestra as second trumpet, becoming principal trumpet in 1943. In 1948 he gave up the trumpet in favor of composing. Despite frequent bouts of mental illness and alcoholism over the years, Arnold produced something like five hundred works, including nine symphonies, twenty concertos, dance music and overtures, works for brass and wind bands, and a host of chamber and choral pieces, all of them marked by rhythmic brilliance and tunefulness. He also became renowned as a composer of film music, with over one hundred scores to his credit, probably the most famous being 1957's *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, for which he won an Academy Award.

Serenade for Small Orchestra, Op. 26

Composed: 1950

Duration: 12 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings

After being discharged from the military toward the end of World War II, Arnold returned to orchestral trumpet playing. But in 1948, he won the Royal Academy of Music's Mendelssohn Scholarship, which gave him the chance to study composition in Italy. This experience soon convinced Arnold to leave the trumpet behind and become a full-time composer. He wrote his Symphony No. 1 in 1949, and in 1951 the two sets of *English Dances* that won him international attention. In between, in 1950, he composed his *Serenade for Small Orchestra*.

Marked Allegretto, the lyrical first movement begins with an idea that cascades gently downward. A more angular second theme emerges, punctuated by timpani rolls and short fanfare figures from the trumpet. The influence of the music of Jean Sibelius, which Arnold

greatly admired, is in evidence here. That cascading idea recurs before the movement's rather abrupt conclusion. The two clarinets open the second movement, introducing an idea that evolves into a shapely melody, a slow and peaceful waltz that is interrupted by stormy and mysterious music before a full-blooded return of the opening idea. It is Dmitri Shostakovich rather than Sibelius that seems to be a major influence in the final movement, with its driving, swirling energy and dramatic punctuations from the brass.

Béla Bartók

Born: March 25, 1881, Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary (now Sannicolau Mare, Romania)

Died: September 26, 1945, New York, New York

One of the twentieth century's most important composers, Béla Bartók started studying music at age five, and graduated from Budapest's Royal Academy of Music (where he later taught piano) in 1901. One of his fellow students at the Royal Academy was Zoltán Kodály, with whom Bartók traveled throughout Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and other countries, collecting thousands of folk songs. These songs, with their modal and pentatonic melodies and aggressive, irregular rhythms, became a major influence on Bartók's own music, including his six string quartets and the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (1936). Bartók's career as pianist flourished in the 1920s, but the rise of fascism in Europe limited his performing opportunities, and in 1940 he and his wife moved to the United States, settling in New York City. In his last years, motivated by the support of friends like violinist Yehudi Menuhin and conductor Serge Koussevitsky, Bartók experienced a resurgence of creative energy, producing the *Concerto for Orchestra* and not-quite-completed works like the Piano Concerto No. 3 and Viola Concerto.

Divertimento for String Orchestra

Composed: 1939

Duration: 26 minutes

Instrumentation: strings

Béla Bartók met Paul Sacher, the legendary patron of new music and founding music director of Switzerland's Basle Chamber Orchestra, in 1929. The two maintained their friendship until Bartók's death in 1945. Sacher commissioned several works from his friend, including the Divertimento for string orchestra, premiered with the Basle Chamber Orchestra on June 11, 1940.

In August 1939 Bartók took up brief residence in a peasant chalet (described by him with some humor as "an ethnographic object") provided by Sacher in the mountains of Saanen, Switzerland. Bartók was fully aware of what was happening throughout Europe – he was, after all, a committee member of the League of Nations and had witnessed not only

Germany's aggression but also the increasingly pro-Nazi stance of many in his Hungarian homeland. The Swiss chalet, however, provided him some temporary solace and ease of work, and he completed the *Divertimento* in a mere fifteen days.

The work's opening theme is accompanied by the chugging motion of regular eighth notes. Soon we hear a string quartet in the more delicate second idea, and later the quartet's more lyrical music is contrasted with the declamatory statements of the orchestra. Throughout the work, but particularly in the outer movements, Bartók makes much of this contrast between the small solo ensemble and the full string body, in the manner of the Baroque concerto grosso. The main ideas return in more laid-back form, and *pizzicati* (plucked notes) support the quiet coda.

The dark, unsettled mood of the second movement is reminiscent of Bartók's earlier *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, another Sacher commission. Tension builds with a couple of shrieks from the violas and a repeating ostinato, harmonized in fourths and fifths, over which the melodic line spins itself out, punctuated by some wrenching dissonances. In the energetic and often lighthearted finale, a sequence of colorful episodes, including a Roma-like cadenza from the violin and a "pizzicato polka" toward the movement's end, propel the music toward its whirlwind conclusion.

Richard Strauss

Born: June 11, 1864, Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

The son of a horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra, Richard Strauss received considerable musical training early in life, and was already writing ambitious and accomplished music as a teenager – the famous conductor Hans von Bülow called the seventeen year old Strauss "by far the most striking personality since Brahms." In the last decade or so of the nineteenth century Strauss composed many of his best-known orchestral scores, like *Don Juan*, *Ein Heldenleben*, and *Also sprach Zarathustra*. Early in the twentieth century his interest turned to opera, as he took conducting posts at the Berlin Hofoper and Vienna Staatsoper and composed renowned operas like *Salome*, *Elektra*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*. He maintained a very busy schedule of composing and conducting, but in the 1930s and 1940s stirred considerable controversy through his involvement with the Nazi regime. He was able to continue working, albeit at a slower pace, even after World War II, producing memorable works such as the *Four Last Songs* in his mid eighties.

Serenade in E-flat major, Op. 7

Composed: 1881

Duration: 9 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns

A composing prodigy, Strauss had already produced a symphony, string quartet, piano sonata, and other works when he composed his Serenade at age seventeen. Strauss's father was a well-known French horn player, and his father's playing style, as well as his taste for the music of the Classical and early Romantic periods – notably that of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Felix Mendelssohn – was certainly an influence on the Serenade, which is scored for an ensemble very similar to that of Mozart's *Gran Partita*, K. 361.

In a single sonata-form movement, the Serenade, while relatively conservative, does contain hints of Strauss's later compositional style, particularly in the length and shape of his melodies. The first main theme is gentle and lyrical, combining oboe, bassoons, and horn, and the second, emerging after a short minor-key transition, takes advantage of the rich sound of the full ensemble. The development section begins with the oboes sounding over sustained notes in the horns and contrabassoon. A rising figure in the lowest instruments leads into the recapitulation, in which the horns are highlighted as the first theme recurs. For the gentle coda, Strauss adds a double bass to reinforce the tonic note of the final two bars, a choice usually ignored in performance.

Carlos Simon

Born: 1986, Washington, D.C.

The music of Carlos Simon spans genres – jazz, gospel, contemporary classical music, and more. A “young composer on the rise, with an ear for social justice” (National Public Radio), Simon is currently Composer-in-Residence for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He earned his doctorate degree at the University of Michigan, and also received degrees from Georgia State University and Morehouse College. He has served on the music faculty at Spelman College and Morehouse College, and is now Assistant Professor at Georgetown University. As a performer, Simon served as music director for Grammy Award winner Jennifer Holliday, and has toured internationally with Grammy-nominee Angie Stone. He has received commissions and performances from the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Los Angeles Opera, Philadelphia Orchestra, Washington National Opera, and Reno Philharmonic. Simon received the 2021 Sphinx Medal of Excellence, the highest honor bestowed by the Sphinx Organization to recognize extraordinary classical Black and Latinx musicians.

Breathe

Composed: 2021

Duration: 12 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 trumpets, percussion, strings

Commissioned by the Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music for the San Francisco Chamber Orchestra, *Breathe* received its first performance on February 25, 2022. Simon has remarked that his piece was the “opposite” of what he was feeling at the time of its composition, as he sought a “meditative process” for himself, orchestra members, and audiences alike. The work is slow, gentle, and undramatic, moving gradually and repeatedly between soft and loud dynamics in an evocation of breathing.

Simon has elaborated on the work's origins, beginning with a quotation from the book that inspired it:

*Drop Thy still dews of quietness
Till all our striving cease*

“One of my favorite books to read and re-read has been *Meditations of the Heart* written by renowned theologian, Howard Thurman. A spiritual advisor to many including Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurman was a prolific writer and preacher who lived in San Francisco for a large part of his life. *Meditations of the Heart* is a collection of meditations and prayers on the beauty of humanity. I was deeply inspired by one section entitled 'Still Dews of Quietness,' which urges one to 'stay put for a spell.' Through his words, I wanted to take the gesture further by writing a piece that encourages others to simply reflect and breathe.”

Danny Elfman

Born: May 29, 1953, Los Angeles, California

The music of Danny Elfman embraces multiple musical genres. While taking a youthful interest in film, Elfman showed little enthusiasm for music until high school. After some post-graduation travels, Elfman became the musical director of his brother's theater troupe, The Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo. That evolved into the new wave group Oingo Boingo, for which Elfman was singer and songwriter and which produced eight albums in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1985, two fans of the group, Tim Burton and Paul Reubens, asked Elfman to write the score for their film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. This started Elfman's career in film music, which now includes scores for over one hundred films, including Academy Award-nominated music for *Milk*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Big Fish*, and *Men in Black*. His collaboration with Tim Burton has continued over some twenty films, including *Batman* (which won Elfman a Grammy Award), *Beetlejuice*, and *Edward Scissorhands*. Elfman also wrote the theme songs for *The Simpsons* and *Desperate Housewives*. Elfman's musical influences range from classic film music to rock, blues, big band jazz, hip hop, minimalism, and world music.

Suite for Chamber Orchestra

Composed: 2023

Duration: 20 minutes

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo and alto flute), oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, percussion, piano, strings

Along with his busy career as a film composer, in the 2000s Danny Elfman turned increasingly to concert music, producing concertos for violin, cello, and percussion as well as other works. One of the most recent of his concert works, the Suite for Chamber Orchestra was co-commissioned by the Library of Congress, The Andre Kostelanetz Royalty Pool, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland. It was premiered by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra on May 4, 2023 in Washington, D.C.

Danny Elfman has written the following about his composition:

"I typically engage in just one concert performance each year, but this particular endeavor marks my debut in the realm of chamber music. While I've previously composed two quartets, I never truly categorized them as chamber music, although I acknowledge their technical classification as such. To me, the prospect of orchestrating for a small ensemble is quite intimidating as I find safety in numbers.

"When I was asked about instrumentation, with questions like 'How many French horns, six or four?,' to which the reply was 'One,' I found myself confronting the challenge head-on. It became evident that this piece was going to push me out of my comfort zone. So, indeed, this experience is truly my inaugural foray into the world of chamber music, and it has proven to be an exhilarating challenge."

Elfman has cited the chamber works of Igor Stravinsky as a big influence on his Suite, which he has called "rather fun," with "a lightness to it and a bit of humor in it." An article written for Faber Music, Elfman's publisher, describes the Suite: "Cast in four effervescent movements, the Suite opens in a lively mood carried along by scurrying semiquavers; a more relaxed, playful allegretto follows, which breaks out into an agitated climax before a more tranquil conclusion. Another allegretto movement has a concertante feel, with prominent solo spots for woodwinds, violin, cello, and percussion; the finale is an ebullient presto."

Program Notes by Chris Morrison