

**Reno Chamber Orchestra
American Dance Party
March 1 & 2, 2025
Nightingale Concert Hall**

Program Notes by Chris Morrison

Scott Joplin

Born: November 24, 1868, Texarkana or Linden, Texas

Died: April 1, 1917, New York City, New York

Known as the "King of Ragtime," Scott Joplin composed more than forty ragtime piano pieces, as well as a ballet and two operas. He grew up in a musical family of railway laborers, who gave him his first musical education. Joplin spent the late 1880s and early 1890s as a traveling musician. His appearance at the Chicago World Fair in 1893 contributed to ragtime's growing popularity. While working as a piano teacher in Missouri, he started to publish his compositions. His *Maple Leaf Rag* became ragtime's first and biggest hit in 1899. After a few years in St. Louis that saw the composition of many of Joplin's most famous rags, in 1907 he moved to New York hoping to have a new opera, *Treemonisha*, produced. But he failed, went bankrupt, and had a breakdown that contributed to his death. In subsequent decades, Joplin's music was largely forgotten until its revival in the 1960s and 1970s, due in part to its use in the famous 1973 film *The Sting*. In 1976, Joplin was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize "bestowed posthumously in this Bicentennial Year, for his contributions to American music."

Overture to *Treemonisha*

Composed: 1910-11

Duration: 8 minutes

With his second opera, *Treemonisha* (the first, *A Guest of Honor* from 1903, is lost), Joplin aimed to create a serious work in the European tradition. *Treemonisha* is sometimes referred to as a "ragtime opera." But Joplin didn't see it that way, and the opera's music actually incorporates a wide range of influences, including ragtime but also folk music, spirituals, and European classical styles and references. Joplin wrote both the music and libretto, and seems to have wanted the opera in part to reflect his biography and his beliefs. Some have speculated that Joplin's second wife, Freddie Alexander, may have inspired the opera - like *Treemonisha*, she was well-educated and an advocate of both women's rights and African-American culture.

Joplin never saw a proper production of *Treemonisha*. The only performance that took place during his lifetime was an informal read-through at the Lincoln Theater in Harlem in 1915, with Joplin playing the piano. After that, the opera remained largely unknown before its rediscovery in 1970, its first partial performance in 1971 by an all-star ensemble

featuring Mary Lou Williams and William Bolcom, and the first complete performance in 1972 in Atlanta. Joplin's original orchestrations for *Treemonisha* have been lost. A number of composers have since created their own, including Gunther Schuller and Rick Benjamin.

Treemonisha takes place in 1884 at a former slave plantation in a isolated forest. Treemonisha, a young freedwoman who has learned to read, has been abducted by a group of conjurers. She is about to be thrown into a giant wasp nest to die, but her friend Remus scares away the conjurers and rescues her. Later, her community recognizes the value of education in shunning superstition, and elects Treemonisha as their teacher and leader.

A strutting motion opens the Overture, with surprising chromatic movements in the harmony. Then a new, lyrical melody is sounded. A couple of brief interludes, one dramatic, one swirling and dreamlike, lead to a return of the dance-like opening theme. The music turns dramatic again, then returns to pastoral lyricism, moving quickly between moods. The dance-like opening idea returns and speeds to a rousing climax.

Leonard Bernstein

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

Leonard Bernstein - conductor, composer, pianist, author, and educator - started playing piano at age 10. After graduating from Harvard, Bernstein studied at the Curtis Institute of Music and the Berkshire Music Center. Over the next several years, Bernstein became well-known as a composer of musicals like *On the Town* and *West Side Story*, as well as symphonies, ballets, and other works, while also conducting around the world. In 1958, Bernstein became Music Director and Conductor of the New York Philharmonic, serving there until 1969 and winning fame for his concerts, recordings, and educational programs such as his Young People's Concerts. After 1969, he continued to compose as well as conduct internationally, including a historic performance on Christmas Day 1989 of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony commemorating the fall of the Berlin Wall. He made over 400 recordings and won eleven Emmy Awards, seventeen Grammy Awards, a Tony Award, and the Kennedy Center Honor. In the words of critic Donal Henahan, he was "one of the most prodigiously talented and successful musicians in American history."

Fancy Free (arr. Sunderland)

Composed: 1944 (arr. 2019)
Duration: 27 minutes

The splash Bernstein made on the music-loving world in the early 1940s is the stuff of legend. Having completed studies at Harvard and Philadelphia's Curtis Institute, in 1940 Bernstein became Serge Koussevitzky's assistant at Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony's summer institute. Three years later, the 25-year-old Bernstein became the Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic, with whom, on November 14, 1943, he made a

famous debut – in a nationwide broadcast – as a last-minute substitute for the ailing Bruno Walter. Bernstein was soon conducting often in New York, while maintaining close ties with Tanglewood.

Bernstein also wanted badly to make his mark as a composer. In 1942 he had completed his Symphony No. 1, “Jeremiah,” which much impressed when it premiered two years later. In October 1943, just weeks before his Philharmonic debut, Bernstein was visited by a young dancer named Jerome Robbins. Newly hired by the American Ballet Theater, Robbins had a vision for a new ballet – a distinctly American, jazz-influenced work about sailors on shore leave. Robbins impressed Bernstein, and although conducting was keeping him very busy, Bernstein took on the project, titled *Fancy Free*. Over the next few months Bernstein would work on the ballet as time permitted, making piano recordings of his new creations and sending them to Robbins, who was on a nationwide tour with the Ballet Theater.

The work took form, and on April 18, 1944, the Ballet Theater presented the premiere of *Fancy Free*. With Bernstein conducting and Robbins serving as both choreographer and lead dancer, its success was sensational. The Ballet Theater extended its season to accommodate further performances of the new work, and in its first year of existence, *Fancy Free* was performed some 160 times. Bernstein’s work with Robbins led to further collaborations, most notably *West Side Story* and *On the Town*, the Broadway adaptation of *Fancy Free*. With the premieres of *Fancy Free* and the “Jeremiah” Symphony and his New York Philharmonic debut, Bernstein was suddenly a star.

The story of *Fancy Free* is simple. Three sailors are on shore leave in New York City. Looking for fun, they head to a bar where they meet two girls. A fight develops, and the sailors stage a competition in which each of them dances. But the girls can’t decide among the three, and fighting breaks out again. The girls slip away, and the sailors realize that women shouldn’t influence their friendship. But in the end a third girl enters the picture, and once again friendship is set aside as they vie for her attention.

In some performances of the ballet, the mood is set before the curtain rises as a jukebox plays a recording of Billie Holiday singing “Big Stuff.” (In a recording of the ballet made late in his life, Bernstein himself sings “Big Stuff” in his raspy, cigarette-scarred voice.) The action proper begins with “Enter Three Sailors,” a high-stepping number that reflects the jazz influence that Robbins had envisioned. Great prominence is given here and throughout the ballet to the piano. A mysterious coda leads into the short nighttime vision “Scene at the Bar.” “Enter Two Girls” has an insouciant strut and sense of expectation. The piano marks time in the background as the sailors and girls size one another up.

The “Pas de deux” begins hesitantly, but soon turns confident and even sensuous, as the tune of “Big Stuff” returns. Then we’re back to the sailors’ opening music in the “Confrontation Scene.” The music grows angry before the sailors take their turns in the “Three Dance Variations.” First is the frenetic “Galop,” with its trumpet solo and rushing strings. The “Waltz” is more laid-back, with a syncopated beat, and the playful “Danzón” pays homage to Cuban music. The “Finale” opens with propulsive strings, then the full

orchestra erupts in fanfare-like figures. The music grows ominous. Piano and percussion briefly evoke again the ambiance of the bar, and the forceful conclusion of the work hints at confrontations to come.

Fancy Free is heard in this concert in an arrangement for chamber orchestra by Garth Edwin Sunderland, the Leonard Bernstein Office's Vice President for Creative Projects and artistic director of the Lost Dog New Music Ensemble, for which he made the arrangement.

Michael Abels

Born: October 8, 1962, Phoenix, Arizona

Michael Abels is best known for his scores for the Jordan Peele films *Get Out*, *Us*, and *Nope*, and for the opera *Omar*, co-written with Rhiannon Giddens, which won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Music. Abels grew up with his grandparents, and showed an interest in music from an early age. By thirteen, he had completed his first orchestral work. He attended the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music in Los Angeles, and explored his African-American roots by studying gospel music and African drumming at the California Institute for the Arts. His other film scores include those for *Bad Education*, *Nightbooks*, *Fake Famous*, and the series *Allen v. Farrow*. He has also written concert works for the Kronos Quartet, violinist Hilary Hahn, and guitarist Mak Grgic. Abels is co-founder of the Composers Diversity Collective, an advocacy group to increase visibility of composers of color in film, gaming, and streaming media.

Delights & Dances

Composed: 2007

Duration: 13 minutes

Delights & Dances was commissioned by the Sphinx Organization to celebrate their tenth year of supporting diversity in concert music. Originally for orchestra with a large number of soloists, the work's instrumentation was subsequently revised for string quartet and string orchestra. That arrangement was made specially for the Harlem Quartet, an ensemble of first-place laureates of the Sphinx Competition for outstanding young black and Latino string players.

The first section of *Delights & Dances*, marked "Bluesy," starts with a graceful, expressive cello solo, soon taken up by solo viola and violin, then becoming a duet and a quartet. A dancing *pizzicato* figure from the string orchestra accompanies a new idea from the solo cello that also moves to the quartet. Soloists from the quartet take virtuoso solo turns. Lines from the quartet members and orchestra start to intersect, as the string orchestra moves from *pizzicato* to bowed notes. Suddenly the pace quickens substantially for the work's second section, "Bluegrassy," as the music turns into a lively hoedown, with a couple of appearances by a more sinuous idea, and more colorful solos for the quartet members.

Duke Ellington

Born: April 29, 1899, Washington, D.C.

Died: May 24, 1974, New York City, New York

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington is one of the most significant figures in jazz history. His legacy includes hundreds of recordings, ranging from the 1920s to the 1970s, and over 3,000 compositions. Both of his parents were pianists, and the young Ellington started lessons at age seven, and wrote his first composition at fifteen. From the mid-1920s, Ellington and his band performed regularly at Harlem's Cotton Club. Over the years the Duke Ellington Orchestra developed a signature sound via renowned band members like trumpeter Bubber Miley and saxophonist Johnny Hodges, as well as Ellington's ambitious compositions and use of distinctive harmonies, textures, and forms. Starting near the end of the 1930s and continuing for over thirty years, Ellington collaborated with Billy Strayhorn on both composing and arranging. The Ellington Orchestra's famous 1956 appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival started a round of recordings and world tours. Ellington was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1999. As composer Gunther Schuller wrote, "In jazz he was a giant among giants. And in twentieth century music, he may yet one day be recognized as one of the half-dozen greatest masters of our time."

Three Songs for Chamber Orchestra (arr. Prutsman)

Composed: 1964 and 1936 (arr. 2024)

Duration: 13 minutes

Avery Fisher Career Grant winner Stephen Prutsman was a medal winner at the Tchaikovsky and Queen Elisabeth Piano Competitions. He has made several recordings as a pianist and performed all over the world. As a composer, his works have been performed by Yo-Yo Ma, Leon Fleisher, Dawn Upshaw, the St. Lawrence String Quartet, and the Silk Road Project. He has also created dozens of compositions and arrangements for the Kronos Quartet.

Prutsman's arrangement of Duke Ellington music, the *Three Songs for Chamber Orchestra*, was commissioned by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Two of the songs he selected were drawn from one of Ellington's and Billy Strayhorn's ambitious multi-movement compositions, while the third is a jazz classic.

After Ellington and his Orchestra toured the Middle East, Turkey and India in 1963, and then Japan in 1964, on trips organized by the U.S. State Department, Ellington and Strayhorn created a nine-section collection of sound impressions from their travels called the *Far East Suite*. That Suite's sixth movement, "Blue Pepper," starts out Prutsman's work. Subtitled "Far East of the Blues," "Blue Pepper" features a grooving beat that seems to be derived from rock-and-roll. Ellington's 1966 recording of it includes a memorable solo from veteran alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges.

Prutsman follows that with the *Far East Suite*'s second movement, "Bluebird of Delhi," actually written by Strayhorn. It evokes the call of a mynah bird that often visited Strayhorn's room during their stay in India, imitated by clarinetist Jimmy Hamilton in that 1966

recording.

Pruitsman's arrangement concludes with "Caravan," a classic tune co-composed in 1936 by Ellington and the Ellington Band's trombonist Juan Tizol. Like the *Far East Suite*, "Caravan" drew on international inspiration, in this case Afro-Cuban music, with once again a Middle Eastern flair. "Caravan" is perhaps Ellington's most covered song, with over 500 versions published.

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York

Died: July 11, 1937, Los Angeles, California

George Gershwin is one of the most beloved American composers of the twentieth century. His songs, orchestral music, Broadway shows, and his most ambitious work, the "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess* (1935), effectively bring together the worlds of classical music, jazz, and popular music - musical realms that Gershwin never felt were mutually exclusive. Gershwin studied piano as a teenager and worked as a song plugger, performing pop songs in public places to help sell sheet music. The first of his own compositions to become a huge hit was the song "Swanee," written when he was 21 and popularized by Al Jolson. He had several further successes with his own songs and on Broadway, including shows like *Funny Face* (1927), *Strike Up The Band* (1929), *Girl Crazy* (1930), and *Of Thee I Sing!* (1931), the first musical comedy to win the Pulitzer Prize. In 1924, Gershwin composed his first major classical work, *Rhapsody in Blue*; it and *An American in Paris* (1928) have remained staples of the classical repertoire. In 1935, Gershwin moved to Hollywood, composing film scores until his death from a malignant brain tumor.

Variations on "I Got Rhythm"

Composed: 1933-34

Duration: 9 minutes

Gershwin was well-known for improvising at the piano during informal parties with his friends. Director Rouben Mamoulian once wrote, "George at the piano was George happy. He would draw a lovely melody out of the keyboard like a golden thread, then he would play with it and juggle it, twist it and toss it around mischievously, weave it into unexpected, intricate patterns, tie it in knots and untie it and knit it into a cascade of ever-changing rhythms and counter-points ... He could play 'I Got Rhythm' for the thousandth time, yet do it with such freshness and exuberance as if he had written it the night before."

For a planned concert tour with the Leo Reisman Orchestra celebrating the tenth anniversary of the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin elaborated on some of those improvised renditions of "I Got Rhythm," a song that he had originally composed for the hit Broadway show *Girl Crazy* of 1930, and created a set of variations for solo piano and orchestra. Much of the composing was done in December 1933 in Palm Beach, with the orchestration completed the following month. The *Variations on "I Got Rhythm,"* which

Gershwin dedicated "to brother Ira," proved to be his last concert work.

On his radio show *Music by Gershwin*, the composer described his work as being in seven distinct parts - an introduction, the melody, four variations, and a finale. "After the introduction by the orchestra," he elaborated, "the piano plays the theme rather simply. The first variation is a very complicated rhythmic pattern played by the piano while the orchestra takes the theme. The next variation is in waltz time. The third is a Chinese variation in which I imitate Chinese flutes played out of tune ... Next, the piano plays the rhythmic variation in which the left hand plays the melody and the right plays it straight, on the theory that you shouldn't let one hand know what the other is doing. Then comes the finale." Gershwin expert Howard Pollack has suggested that the variations are a miniature depiction of New York City, complete with scenes of the bustling metropolis, young girls sitting on a fire escape in the heat of summer, Chinatown, Harlem, and a Cuban band playing dance music.

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