

Program Notes for Whatcom Symphony Orchestra concert “Bassoonist Kuuskmann”

February 14, 2010
Mt. Baker Theatre

All Nature Plays (2009)

Samuel Adler (b. Mannheim, 1928)

All Nature Plays is the seventh composition in the Music by American Composers series of commissions by the Whatcom Symphony Orchestra. Samuel Adler is a composer who is internationally acclaimed, frequently honored, prolific, active in numerous genres and, of course, widely performed. He is also an important teacher, and he has close connections with other composers named in today’s program. Among his teachers was Aaron Copland, and among his most successful former students are Christopher Theofanidis and the Whatcom Symphony Orchestra’s own Maestro, Roger Briggs.

A world-premiere performance is the beginning of a “reception history” for the composition, as it moves beyond the composer’s workshop and the conditions of the first performance. This afternoon’s performers and audience are important participants in the process.

Samuel Adler has kindly provided the following observations about his new work:

All Nature Plays was commissioned by the Whatcom Symphony Orchestra and is dedicated to its members and its music director Roger Briggs, with whom I have had a long and very happy relationship.

While contemplating the work in the summer of 2009, I sat on the deck in back of my house. All seemed quiet and peaceful and the atmosphere was calm and full of nature noises. Suddenly a little rabbit sprang onto the lawn and in a little pile of dirt began to sun himself on his back, flirting with the birds and insects which were circling him by moving his legs in the air and making happy sounds. I really had never seen such a scene and it inspired this Overture for Orchestra. I felt that I would try to capture the two natural states I had witnessed: the calm of nature and the playful creatures in nature.

The work begins with a short lyrical quiet section and then explodes into a playful dialogue between the various parts of the orchestra. The main idea is expressed in triplet figures, which pervade the entire last section, and this kind of energy is contrasted at various times with some lyrical melodic ideas which relate to the introduction. The emphasis is on the interplay between the four sections of the orchestra, which is constant and leads to a climactic ending, where the entire orchestra is featured in an extended passage for the first time.

Symphony No. 5 in Bb Major (1816)

Franz Peter Schubert (b. Vienna, 1797; d. Vienna, 1828)

In the year 1816, Schubert composed not only two symphonies, but also more than 100 songs, a string quartet, three violin sonatas, a Mass and most of his first full-length opera. He produced his Symphony No. 5 in the space of a few weeks in the late summer. It would have taken a certain amount of courage for a nineteen-year-old composer living in the same city as the master symphonist Beethoven to write a symphony, but it is in the fifth that Schubert began to find his own symphonic voice, breaking away from the departed masters, Mozart and Haydn, and from the living master, Beethoven.

The composer was not in a happy situation while composing this work. He had just received notice that he had been passed over in his application for an attractive teaching position in Laibach (present-day Ljubljana), despite a good recommendation from the influential composer Salieri. In his diary he worried about prospects for marriage (he never did marry) and about happiness in general.

In the music of the Symphony No. 5 little of this concern can be detected. From the seemingly unperturbed mood established by the first movement to the close of the final movement, the atmosphere is generally optimistic--by turns serene, reflective and ebullient. Schubert's lyrical gifts and his experience as a composer of art songs allow the music to flow easily. It is this quality that helps distinguish a symphony of Schubert from one of Beethoven. Where Beethoven might construct a symphonic theme from fragments that can be developed by dissection later in the composition, Schubert tends toward themes that flow more readily in sentences and paragraphs. Compare, for instance, the start-and-stop beginning of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (short-short-short-long) with the free-flowing opening of Schubert's Symphony No. 5. Here, even at the age of nineteen, Schubert shows signs of distancing himself from his idol.

The beginning of Schubert's third movement, though, presents a surprise, as the mood turns darker. The composer labeled the movement "Minuetto," after the customary moderate-speed dance found in the symphonies of Mozart and Haydn; however, he also called for a faster speed, "Allegro molto," which brings the character of the music closer to Beethoven's practice and gives an unsettling effect.

By injecting the lyricism of his songs into a purely instrumental genre, Schubert produced a symphony that even the forty-five-year-old Beethoven must have found impressive.

Concerto for Bassoon and Chamber Orchestra (1997, revised 2002)

Christopher Theofanidis (b. Dallas, 1967)

Christopher Theofanidis is one of the most visible composers of his generation. His works are frequently intended for particular performers, and he has commissions scheduled far into the future. Currently that future includes commissioned works for the San Francisco Opera and the Houston Grand Opera, slated for 2011 and 2012. Theofanidis' orchestral composition *Rainbow Body* has gotten wide play by major orchestras, and he composed his recent Violin Concerto for Sarah Chang, who premiered it with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Theofanidis has enriched the concerto repertoire of other instruments as well. In 1994 he composed a Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra and in 1997 completed the first version of his Concerto for Bassoon and Chamber Orchestra.

Theofanidis wrote his concerto for the bassoon virtuoso Martin Kuuskmann, who plays it in today's performance. The composer prefaced his score with a dedication to the soloist and his wife, "for Martin and Tiina." The three-movement work begins distinctively, with a lengthy cadenza that presents several facets of the bassoon's repertoire of moods, even before the orchestra is allowed to enter. Marked "Alone, inward," this cadenza begins as a soft, long-breathed melody and then periodically erupts into faster passages. After a strategically placed silence, the music begins again, this time quite loud, and covering the entire range of the instrument. Here, and also in the second movement, the style and flavor of folk music of the Republic of Georgia shines through, providing a window into the listening habits of the composer.

The orchestra serves as a foil for the soloist. The orchestral bassoon, for instance, might play a straightforward version of the melody while the solo bassoon plays an ornate version of the same tune, at the same time. Or individual instruments in the orchestra might engage in dialogue with the soloist. The concerto also calls for feats of virtuosity. In the third movement one listens carefully in order to figure out when and how the soloist breathes. The mood descriptions given at the beginning of each movement in the score range from “Alone, inward” to the last movement’s instruction, “Searing, focused.” It is the centerpiece of the concerto, the second movement, that says it most succinctly, “Beautiful.” And it is.

Appalachian Spring (1944)

Aaron Copland (b. Brooklyn, 1900; d. Westchester, 1990)

In several of his best-known works Aaron Copland cultivated an image of rural America. The title of the ballet *Appalachian Spring*, a cornerstone on which Copland’s reputation rests securely, calls up such a geographical location. America’s most famous composer of the wide-open spaces was born in Brooklyn of parents who had emigrated from Russia. Educated in New York and at the famous studio of Nadia Boulanger in Paris, he absorbed diverse musical influences. Copland set about to cultivate a deliberate “American” style, and he succeeded brilliantly in *Appalachian Spring*.

The story follows a young couple as they marry and settle into the life of their community. Since the composition begins and ends in the same quiet, ethereal mood, there is an implication that we are witnessing a single, complete statement of an ongoing life cycle. During the cycle we eavesdrop on quiet moments, vigorous community dancing and noble deeds. In the best-known part of the ballet, a simple statement of faith glows, in the form of variations on a traditional Shaker tune known as “Simple Gifts.” The Shakers, or Shaking Quakers, originated in England in the 18th century but are now found mainly in the U.S. They practice celibacy, accept new members by conversion, hold common ownership of property and engage in a strict, simple way of life that includes dancing as a form of religious expression.

In a sense *Appalachian Spring* is a stylized view of an American rural world as seen by a supremely cosmopolitan composer. Copland originally called the work *A Ballet for Martha* (Graham), who danced the first performance in 1944. Ms. Graham gave the work its present title, recalling a phrase from Hart Crane’s poem “The Bridge.” Copland soon fashioned the music into a suite and expanded the orchestration of the thirteen-instrument original into a version for full orchestra. In this form the work has become one of the composer’s most popular compositions. In 1945 Copland received the Pulitzer Prize for *Appalachian Spring*.

Program notes by Edward Rutschman

Rutschman's musicological articles have been published in the U.S. and Europe, and his compositions have been performed in the U.S., Canada, Germany and Turkey. A member of the Music Department faculty at Western Washington University, he is a recipient of the Bellingham Mayor's Arts Award and of WWU's Excellence in Teaching Award.