

Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Opening Night

Sept 27 – 29, 2019

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)

CUBAN OVERTURE

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

Had a brain tumor not cut short George Gershwin's vertical career at such a young age, the chapter on classical music in America would have grown quickly into a volume of its own. For Gershwin was well on his way with a new synthesis that helped bridge the gap between the popular and serious worlds of music in the United States.

Gershwin was a man whose life and work sparkled, who captured the infectious gaiety of his time, and who wove the blues, jazz, and ragtime into the rich and complex embroidery of the symphony orchestra. His first hit, *Swanee*, made him famous – and wealthy – at age 21, and from then on, he composed as if possessed.

"There can be no doubt that Gershwin was an extraordinarily fertile songwriter," noted the American critic Tim Page. "He made ripe, luscious melodies as an apple tree makes apples – melodies that sound equally at home in a jazz club and a concert hall."

His deep reservoir of melody and skill as a composer for theater landed him lucrative contracts in New York and London, resulting in such musicals as *Strike up the Band*, *Girl Crazy*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Of Thee I Sing*. *Rhapsody in Blue* was his masterstroke, and his lone opera – *Porgy and Bess* – takes pride of place in the annals of American musical theater, a work Gershwin described as resembling "the drama and romance of *Carmen* and the beauty of *Meistersinger*."

The work on tonight's program, the *Cuban Overture*, is a musical postcard capturing Gershwin's whirlwind two-week vacation in Havana, where he admitted to too much booze and not enough sleep. He was fascinated by the colorful street bands and their instruments: bongos, claves, gourds, and maracas. "Cuba was most interesting to me," Gershwin wrote, "especially for its small dance orchestras, who play the most intricate rhythms most naturally."

Gershwin returned to New York along with a collection of these instruments, and in the summer of 1932 finished the 10-minute score to *Rumba*, soon to be given a more fitting title before a benefit concert at the Metropolitan Opera.

The *Cuban Overture*, as it was renamed, is cast in a single movement with two fast outer sections serving as bookends to a slow middle, marked to be played with warmth and expressiveness. The music is full of sparkle and rhythmic verve, which mask the intricate contrapuntal technique Gershwin had been studying and proudly employed in the opening section. Wanting to showcase the original instruments he heard in Havana, Gershwin insisted they be placed in front of the conductor's podium, treating them as soloists and delighting audiences lucky enough to sit close to the stage.

EDVARD GRIEG (1843-1907)

PIANO CONCERTO IN A MINOR, OP. 16

Duration: ca. 30 minutes

Norway's best-known composer, Edvard Grieg, was a shy, inward-looking man inspired by the calm of the country, away from the bustle and noise of his native Bergen. He found solace in summer trips to a cottage near Copenhagen, where he enjoyed some of his most fruitful days and nights of composing. The country also suited his delicate health – Grieg suffered from a pulmonary condition that would kill him, in 1907, ending the career of a romanticist with both feet firmly planted in 19th century tradition. Although Grieg wrote a youthful symphony, the concert suites *Holberg* and *Peer Gynt* (which opens with the ethereal *Morning Mood*), he was not comfortable with large forms, preferring the intimacy of his more than 60 *Lyric Pieces* for piano as well as other miniaturisms that one composer called “bon bons wrapped in snow.”

The least characteristic of all Grieg's works is, ironically, one of the most popular in the classical canon, the *Piano Concerto in A Minor*. Unlike his more reticent pieces, the concerto announces itself with an outburst of self-assurance, the opening rumble of timpani setting off an avalanche of hearty melodies.

Similarities between this work and Schumann's *Piano Concerto in A Major* are no coincidence; in fact, the opening of both works seems to be cast from the same die. Grieg fell in love with the music after hearing it performed by Clara Schumann at a concert in Leipzig. Afterward, in 1870, Grieg met the great pianist Franz Liszt, who was impressed with the younger composer's *First Violin Sonata*. Grieg shared the handwritten manuscript of his *Piano Concerto*, which Liszt played by sight and offered advice on orchestration. Grieg accepted some of his counsel, but never stopped dabbling: From its inception in 1868 until the year of his death, Grieg revised the work no less than eight times.

Today, the concerto remains at the heart of the repertoire – with more than 100 recordings (including the first piano concerto ever recorded, in 1909) – and its frothy opening passage is one of the most recognizable in all of music. It may not have the weight and seriousness of purpose of other famed concertos, but it sticks to the ribs and has a sound all its own, wrote Harold C. Schonberg in his book *Lives of the Great Composers*: “Grieg never struck very deep and his range is narrow. Grieg does not represent power or revolution. He represents charm, grace, sweetness. He was a minor master, and one of the finest.”

The concerto opens with a salvo: a timpani roll followed by a series of descending octaves by the piano. From there, Grieg condenses his material into a neatly packed development section with not a wasted note. Near the end, the soloist takes over with an impassioned cadenza. The adagio requires an unerring delicacy from the soloist, free of showmanship, and when done well, this lyric, plaintive movement can mirror the middle section of a Mozart concerto.

The piece closes with a flourish, a fast-paced Norwegian dance known as a *halling*, even if piano and orchestra are not all that well integrated and Grieg comes up short in developing his material. Most concertgoers could care less; they leave the hall humming tunes all the way home.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

LEONORE OVERTURE NO. 3, OP. 72

Duration: ca. 14 minutes

No single work gave Beethoven more fits than his lone opera, *Fidelio*, which he struggled with for a decade and wrote no less than four overtures. “This opera will win for me a martyr's crown,” he once grumbled.

Beethoven's angst has been attributed to his perfectionism in setting to music his poetic ideal of freedom, as he would do so magnificently in the *Ninth Symphony*. The opera, however, ran into all sorts of artistic and production snags that demanded revisions of the original overture to better suit his largest score – or in the case of the *Leonore Overture No. 3*, to not suit it at all.

The overture simply overpowered the opera's emotional drama, muscling the opening scene, stealing thunder from the action's middle, and spoiling the surprise ending. This was potent stuff, and soon took on a life of its own as an orchestral work preceding the great single-movement symphonic poems that echoed through much of the 19th century.

At just over 12 minutes and crafted in sonata form, the overture is a marvel of musical storytelling, capturing the light-triumphs-darkness motif as well as anything Beethoven ever wrote. He identified with the plight of Florestan, the high-minded husband of Leonore who is unjustly sentenced to isolation in a tyrant's dungeon. Disguised as a man (Fidelio), Leonore gains access to the prison and frees her lover, setting in motion themes of injustice, empowerment, good over evil, hope, and the exhilaration of freedom.

"Here is the theatrical version of Beethoven's heroic style, which is the French revolutionary style," writes Jan Swafford in his biography, *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. "Grand, spacious, forceful, direct, popularistic."

MASON BATES (1977-)

MOTHERSHIP

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

Last January, TFO gave many listeners their first taste of a Grammy-winning composer from Virginia named Mason Bates, who was born about the time our orchestra was putting together its 10th anniversary season. Part classical pundit, part disc jockey, Bates has developed a compelling voice, writing music "in a real American language," according to TFO Music Director Michael Francis. Proof was the *Cello Concerto* we enjoyed last season, and knowing he was onto something, Francis decided to bring back Bates for this weekend's season opener with an ear smacker called *Mothership*, a combination of orchestra, techno, pop and swing.

"*Mothership* has been a phenomenal calling card for me," Bates said. "What's interesting about this piece is it's been the gateway for so many orchestras to use electronics, the first time they're incorporating electronic sounds into their concerts."

For those new to Bates, he composes outside the lines. His club/classical project *Mercury Soul* transforms the commercial dance venue into a hybrid musical event, and his opera *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* is one of the best-selling productions in the history of the Santa Fe Opera. His symphonic music fuses social media and electronics, giving the orchestra a digital edge and broadening the boundaries of its repertoire.

Composer-in-residence at the Kennedy Center, Bates is in demand by orchestras wanting to attract younger audiences and build future repertoire, two of their biggest challenges today, according to *Musical America Worldwide*. But he isn't composing just to attract a younger audience; he wants to appeal to everyone who steps into a concert hall, regardless of age.

“When I’m writing music for the concert hall I go after what is the most pregnant musical possibility, not just the outreach component (winning new audiences),” he said. “Older subscribers go along because they can tell I have roots in classical music. But I think listeners enjoy the collision of an old medium with sounds that could be on their iPod. With *Mothership*, the music has surface newness and some real tethering to the symphonic tradition.”

Mothership was first performed in 2011 at the Sydney Opera House and broadcast live on YouTube to nearly 2 million viewers. Much like *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* by John Adams, the one-movement, 10-minute work is a rhythmic tour de force that rockets off the stage immediately. Bates describes it as an “action-packed, electro-acoustic” feast for the senses that brings together the formal symphonic scherzo used by Beethoven with the edgy sounds of today. It can be performed with or without a quartet of soloists.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

BOLERO

Duration: ca. 15 minutes

Ravel was a small man, precise in routine, well-groomed and impeccable in manners and dress. His musical tastes leaned toward traditional form and structure when much of the world around him was genuflecting over Wagner or rioting in the streets over Stravinsky. It was the latter, in fact, who called Ravel “a Swiss clockmaker,” referring to his maniacal attention to detail and technical brilliance.

While in many ways he mirrors his fellow countryman, Debussy, Ravel wasn’t a modernist or ground breaker, preferring to build off the scaffolding of Mozart or draw on the bounce of a baroque dance. He was master orchestrator in the vein of Rimsky-Korsakov, and this allowed him to spin shimmering webs of fantasy and sensuousness, kaleidoscopes of color that varied from exotic to grotesque. Just listen to the opening of *Daphnis et Chloe* and you hear nature awakening at dawn; with *La Valse*, a Viennese waltz goes mad; and *Pavane for a Dead Princess* rides on a melody few composers could ever match.

Then we have *Bolero*. Written in 1928 for an obscure ballet, it was intended to support dancers, not serve as a stand-alone in the concert hall, one reason Ravel expected it to fade into oblivion. He called it “orchestration without music,” but harsher sentiment followed the premiere, when a critic slammed it as “the most insolent monstrosity ever perpetuated in the history of music.”

Today, *Bolero* enjoys unflagging popularity, a hybrid of both masterworks and pops programs. Yes, *Bolero* is a study in repetition – the same C major pattern repeats itself 13 times against a snare drum – but it would be an injustice to call it simplistic. A long crescendo based on two themes and decorated in the flavors of Spanish flamenco, it moves forward on an insistent rhythm that grows in volume and intensity.

Bolero begins quietly and ends demonically, a traditional form turned on its head, with exhilarating effect. It makes no demands on listeners and performers – except on the poor snare drummer, who never gets a break.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.