LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)
CANDIDE OVERTURE
Duration: ca. 5 minutes

When Stuart Malina began putting together a program of American masters, he chose a modern symphony, a jazzy tone poem, and an off-beat concerto. But he needed something else, and thought, “How do I begin?”

“By getting the ball rolling, and Candide fits the bill,” said TFO’s principal guest conductor. “It’s short, familiar to the orchestra, and audiences love it. It’s an explosive piece that doesn’t let up. It elicits smiles.”

When Bernstein completed his operetta Candide in 1956, he had hopes of a Broadway hit, which is exactly what happened with his greatest achievement, West Side Story. Based loosely on Voltaire’s 1759 novella of the same name, Bernstein’s “Valentine card to European music” included more than 30 numbers over two hours. But Americans were turned off its highbrow, esoteric libretto. It was, simply, a flop.

Bernstein was too savvy to let the failure fester. He did what any respectable composer would do: condense the lengthy score into a concert appetizer. As an overture, it worked perfectly, and after its first performance, the New York Times critic Harold Schonberg called it “a smart, sophisticated little piece.”

Nowhere did Bernstein cram more variety into a tighter space than in this gem, a potpourri of musical irony and wit. The Rossini-like overture opens with an Olympics-sounding fanfare, followed by a can-can, war march, and a cascade of counter melodies full of ironic bite – all in less than five minutes.

The overture would be Bernstein’s most-often played work, one reason the New York Philharmonic performed it – without a conductor – at the composer’s memorial service in 1990.

CHRISTOPHER THEOFANIDIS (1967-)
SYMPHONY NO. 1
Duration: ca. 35 minutes

The longest work on tonight’s program is the Symphony No. 1 by Christopher Theofanidis, a Texas-born composer and professor at Yale University best known for his Rainbow Body. Substantial and serious, it fits well with the jazziness of Bernstein and Gershwin and the soft repetitions of Glass, said TFO Principal Guest Conductor Stuart Malina, who leads this weekend’s program.
“It’s profound but utterly palatable,” he said. “Chris writes music that has an underpinning of the spiritual, and it’s almost terrifying in its use of orchestral sonority. It’s a very powerful piece, a major work of American music.”

First performed in 2009 by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the half-hour piece is cast in four movements, two outer pillars surrounding two lyrical inner sections. Here’s a description of each movement, edited from the composer’s website:

I. A choir of woodwinds open this 12-minute intro, soon joined by an explosion of the entire orchestra. At times joyous, the music becomes “a slightly out-of-control version of itself,” and offers an emotional energy in contrast to the final movement.

II. This lyrical, eight-minute section surges upward with great power and effect, peppered by woodblocks. Muted trombones introduce an ominous theme taken up by the strings, and members of the orchestra actually sing, their “oohs” and “aahs” adding another dimension to the sound.

III. A four-minute scherzo, this section is a swirl of dance rhythms sprinkled with plucked strings. Flutes and clarinets offer a refrain repeated by the rest of the orchestra. The “darting material of the strings provides the fuel for all of the rest of the material in the movement. This movement would have an almost classical feel to it, were it not for the tidal surges of the brass and percussion.”

IV. The finale opens with a thunderclap that sets up a dark, ominous mood, the music “tormented by flashes of light and beauty,” before the symphony ends on the dying beats of the kettledrum.

“I think the audience is going to love this piece,” Malina said of TFO’s first-ever performances of the symphony. “It grabs you at the very beginning and doesn’t let go until the end.”

**PHILIP GLASS (1937-)**
**CONCERTO FOR SAXOPHONE QUARTET**
Duration: ca. 23 minutes

Philip Glass may be the closest a living composer gets to being a cultural phenomenon. We know him as one of the founders of the minimalist movement, but we can’t escape his presence in film, opera, theater, pop, new age, and even advertising. Where most of today’s composers are happy to sell a few thousand records, Glass moves millions, enjoying the royalties that come with commercial success. Not bad for a guy who once drove a cab and installed dishwashers.

Minimalism grew out of reaction to the academic, detached, cerebral music of the 1950s, much of which rubbed people the wrong way and gave orchestras and audiences little to chew. A “new Romanticism” followed, but so did something else: sounds propelled by simple, tonal ideas, hypnotic rhythms, and a pulse. It was music stripped naked, baring tendon and bone.

“Minimalism is the story not so much of a single sound as of a chain of connections,” writes Alex Ross in his book *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the 20th Century*. The ambient innovator Brian Eno described it as “a drift away from narrative and towards landscape, from performed event to sonic space.” Steve Reich, one of the movement’s founders along with Glass, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young, likens it to “placing your feet in the sand by the ocean’s edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves gradually bury them.”
Glass made his mark as a minimalist with such works as *Music in 12 Parts*, but he also moved on to a maximalist stage. His studies at the Juilliard School, tutelage under the iconic Parisian pedagogue Nadia Boulanger and sitarist Ravi Shankar all opened Glass to a wide spectrum of sound. The insistent, cell-like phrases and perpetual drones of his chamber works evolved into the hallucinatory operatic style of *Einstein on the Beach*, the introspective tableaux of *Satyagraha*, the score for the 1998 film *The Truman Show*, and the banality of the *Symphony No. 2*. If Glass has been criticized for losing his edge for the sake of commercialism, he defends his choices.

“I started out being an experimental composer, but now I’m very much a popular composer,” he said in the mid-1980s. “I reserve the right to change my work through my career. Every artist does. My intention was always to look for a broader public.”

Somewhere in between lies the *Concerto for Saxophone Quartet*, written in 1995 for soprano, tenor, alto and baritone saxophones in four brief movements marked slow, fast, slow, fast. “It’s a very hypnotic piece,” said TFO Music Director Michael Francis. “It’s complicated but not in an obvious way, and is a very beautiful piece to listen to.”

Although technically demanding, the concerto is deliberate and measured. The ebb and flow of the first and third movements almost lull listeners into a semi-sleep, while the jazzy second and fourth keep us alert and engaged.

“It’s actually not a typical Glass piece,” said Stuart Malina, TFO’s principal guest conductor who designed tonight’s program. “There’s a lot of repeated patterns but there’s also a lyricism lacking in many of his other works. And I think this piece goes well with *American in Paris*, because the saxophone quartet will play in that, too.”

Glass composed the work for the Rascher Saxophone Quartet from Germany, and wrote two versions, one for quartet and one for quartet and orchestra. The Rascher group will perform tonight.

**GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)**

**AN AMERICAN IN PARIS**

Duration: ca. 16 minutes

When George Gershwin approached the famed composer Maurice Ravel for private music lessons, the Frenchman turned the table, imploring the American – albeit sarcastically – for tips on composing jazz. Gershwin didn’t carry the weight of his European contemporaries, but they admired him, taking note of this young “song plugger” from Brooklyn, whose Broadway musicals, *Rhapsody in Blue*, and Tin Pan Alley piano improvisations would help define not only the jazz age, but a new American orchestral sound.

Gershwin was a natural. While riding a bus through New York one day a tune popped into his head. He jotted down what would become the hit *Swanee*, earning him an unprecedented $10,000 in one year and selling 2 million records. Gershwin was famous, rich, and a darling of both the public and critics. After the success of *Rhapsody*, one critic advised Gershwin to “go straight on, and you will knock all of Europe silly.”

Gershwin did just that. In 1928 he traveled to France and soaked up the lifestyle, taking in the cafes,
concerts, bustle and people. His impressions gave birth to the tone poem *An American in Paris*, what one French writer described as “Jazzbo in Montparnasse.” The work would inspire the 1951 Academy Award-winning film of the same name, starring Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron.

“My purpose is to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city,” Gershwin wrote, “listens to the various street noises and absorbs the French atmosphere.”

The first of five brief, connected sections takes listeners onto the streets of Paris, the strings mimicking the visitor’s stroll amid sounds of taxi horns. Gershwin insisted actual horns be used in performances, not trumpets or trombones. “And that is in fact what they are,” said conductor Stuart Malina. “They’re pitched horns, with the black rubber bulbs you squeeze.”

Next comes a slow bluesy section that expresses the visitor’s homesickness. Hints of the Charleston can be heard afterward, what the composer described as “a second fit of blues,” and the work concludes with an invigorating stroll down the Champs-Elysees.

“It’s loads of fun to perform and listen to,” Malina said. “It’s compact, full of beautiful melodies, and very mature orchestration. You really hear Gershwin’s ability to spin melodies in this piece.”

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