

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Beethoven's Symphony No. 7

Oct 31 & Nov 1, 2020

JESSIE MONTGOMERY (1981-)**STRUM****Duration: ca. 7 minutes**

When violinist Jessie Montgomery appeared with her group, the Sphinx Virtuosi, in St. Petersburg earlier this year, the program played out like a searing documentary in sound. The Detroit-based ensemble - which consists of African Americans and Latinos - set up shop for a three-day residency at the Museum of Fine Arts, performing music as diverse as it was dramatic.

Montgomery will be featured in the Tampa Bay area in another way, as composer. For the first time, TFO will perform her engrossing work *Strum*, written in 2006 and revised six years later. Although purely abstract, it's part of her effort to contribute to an American sound, at the same time making an impact through the intersection of social justice and the arts. Her commitment to addressing inequity is one reason the New York Philharmonic this year honored her as a featured composer for its Project 19, which marks the centennial of the ratification of the 19th Amendment and a woman's right to vote.

Montgomery calls music her "connection to the world," and it challenges her to make clear the things she doesn't understand. Creating a piece like *Strum* is anything but an academic exercise; it often comes from the gut.

"It's an emotional process in that I have to be willing and able to work creatively and openly, which is very much tied to mood and general pacing of my day," she said. "But if I'm working to convey any particular emotion in the piece, I'm not necessarily *feeling* that emotion when I'm writing. I think the ebb and flow and emotional expression in the music happen somehow on another plane, through the performer's interpretation."

Hearing one of her original pieces performed by an orchestra – especially a first performance – is often a tense affair because she never knows where things might go.

"To be honest, I get *really* nervous during premieres," she added. "Usually, if I've had a chance to rehearse the piece with players ahead of time, it can ease that anxiety, but I still get excited and nervous as if I'm performing myself!"

Originally written for string quartet and revised for string orchestra, *Strum* opens with a compact, sweetly lyrical melody framed by pizzicato strings. Instruments soon swirl to a dance-like tempo, with jarring notes giving way to a spacious harmony. A new idea emerges as the ensemble turns upbeat, dashes off a few piercing harmonics and a thicket of plucked strings at a vigorous pace. The piece comes to rest on a final, muted note.

ZOLTAN KODALY (1882-1967)**DANCES OF GALANTA****Duration: ca. 16 minutes**

Like his fellow countryman Bela Bartok, Kodaly loved the folk music of Hungary and wove its rich tradition of song into much of his music. The two men formed a society to promote the indigenous sounds of their homeland and to preserve its folk lineage, which Kodaly viewed as a “primordial expression of the spirit.”

With his inquisitive mind, Kodaly became an ethnomusicologist, exploring most every aspect of music, not only as a composer, but as a critic, historian, conductor and teacher. He established a school curriculum throughout Hungary, and his teaching method is still used today in the United States and Europe. When Kodaly died, he had achieved his two greatest goals – to promote Hungarian folk music and create a successful method of teaching music for children.

Kodaly’s music spans seven decades, with compositions dating from 1897 – the year Rachmaninoff premiered his *First Symphony* – to his final work in 1966 – when The Beatles released *Revolver*. Among the best-loved of Kodaly’s creations is his one-movement *Dances of Galánta*, composed in 1933 as a symphonic poem. The work is set in a rondo form, in which the first or main theme reappears in other sections and again at the end.

Kodaly infused it with material from an 18th century dance called the verbunkos, the inspiration behind Franz Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsodies*. Kodaly collected gypsy tunes he knew while living in Galánta – a small rail town mostly destroyed during World War II – and the music captures the boisterous nature of the dances.

A virtuosic showpiece for orchestra, *Galánta* is full of rich, earthy detail and extroverted writing for woodwinds, brass and strings. It opens with a solemn theme that alternates through different tempos and moods of key and character. The famed finale may remind listeners of a Russian Cossack dance, and its vivid rhythms often bring audiences to their feet.

Of all Kodaly’s creations, this was a favorite because it reminded him “of the most beautiful seven years of (my) childhood in Galánta” and its colorful history. “May this modest composition serve to continue the old tradition.”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)**SYMPHONY NO. 7 in A MAJOR, OP. 92****Duration: ca. 38 minutes**

Had Beethoven composed only one symphony, and it happened to be the music contained in the *Seventh*, he would still be idolized today. The work doesn’t echo the heroic, fateful or universal themes of his other symphonies, and it has no hidden meanings that give rise to controversy. It does, however, knock rhythm on its ear. Because with the *Seventh*, Beethoven got up to dance.

In celebration of the 250th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth, TFO continues its traversal of the nine symphonies, and this week fires up the work composer Richard Wagner called “the apotheosis of the dance” and a piece that has always been firmly centered in the repertoire.

Composed in the bright key of A Major, the symphony has an “open air” quality about it, an up-tempo feel and a sharpness that enhances its rhythmic muscle. Unlike the famous *Symphony No. 5*, which “recycles” musical ideas to unify the four movements, the *Seventh* sets each section apart with its own distinct rhythmic urgency.

The symphony commands our attention from the first powerful chord, soon followed by others that begin the longest introduction – 62 bars – of any symphony up to that time. A solo flute shines light on a new, rollicking tune that sets the pace for everything that follows.

At the heart of the work is the allegretto, a magnificent slow movement that mirrors the *Funeral March* of the composer’s *Third Symphony*. Essentially a set of variations wrapped around a single, hypnotic motif, the music moves forward like waves on the shore, receding and crashing back again.

The composer and critic Virgil Thomson once called this movement “the saddest, most tragic piece Beethoven ever wrote, surrounded and framed by three of the most exuberant affirmations that exist.” No wonder that at the first performance of the symphony in 1813, a thrilled audience insisted this movement be played as an encore. The persistence of rhythm continues in the scherzo, releasing us from our trance, and propels us headfirst into a manic finale full of unbridled energy.

Program notes by Kurt Loft, former music critic for The Tampa Tribune who has been writing about the area’s arts for more than 40 years.