

# Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

## An American in Paris

Fawzi Haimor, *Conductor*  
Thomas J. Graf, *Tuba*

Friday, January 6, 2023, Straz Center- Ferguson Hall at 8:00 pm  
Saturday, January 7, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm  
Sunday, January 8, 2023, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

**Joshua Cerdenia**  
(b. 1989)

**Wynton Marsalis**  
(b. 1961)

**Duke Ellington**  
(1899-1974)  
Orch. By Maurice Peress

**George Gershwin**  
(1898-1937)  
(Arr. Frank Campbell-Watson)

***Feuertrunken (Fire-drunk)\****

**Concerto for Tubist & Orchestra [2021] 🎵**

- I. Up!
  - II. Boogaloo Americana
  - III. Lament
  - IV. In Bird's Basement
- Thomas J. Graf, *Tuba*

*Intermission*

**Black, Brown and Beige\*\***

**An American in Paris 🎵**

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**Joshua Cerdenia (1989- )**  
**Feuertrunken (Fire-Drunk)**  
Duration: ca. 10 minutes

A line from Friedrich Schiller's famous poem *Ode To Joy* caught Joshua Cerdenia's eye. He'd heard it sung numerous times in the final movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, but this time it set off a spark.

*Wir betreten feuertrunken, Himmlische, dein Heiligtum!* – which translates to “We enter, drunk with fire, Heavenly One, your sanctuary!” – inspired a new piece that Cerdenia calls “a loud meditation on joy.” Composed in 2017, *Feuertrunken* is a work of explosive vitality, and at its beginning hints of another famous piece, Mahler's *First Symphony*. But what else prompted Cerdenia to put pen to paper?

“In the months I spent composing the piece, I found little cause for celebration in the many goings-on both locally and abroad,” he said, mentioning a world full of trouble and tragedy. “Perhaps this was the reason I thought the subject of joy had so much urgency.”

During this time, Cerdenia also read the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's vision of purgatory, and was drawn to the description of the great wall of fire between himself and paradise. He found this to be ideal for a musical setting.

“An angel of God encourages him to make the plunge into his final trial,” the Philippine-born composer said. “Though my piece as a whole is not programmatic and doesn't correspond to anything in Dante's story, there's a brief interlude in which I image Dante in devoted silence before he submits to the fire.”

The piece begins out of a primordial mist floating over the listener and gains strength and intensity as more instruments join in. Jagged rhythms usher in a sense of unease while the brass becomes dense, and at times demonic. The strings suddenly take flight, as if rising off the stage, egged on by a zealous percussion section. Following a tranquil moment by two harps, the orchestra launches into another frenzied state, threatening to go atonal before a sustained note brings the work safely to a halt.

After its premiere in 2017 by the Detroit Symphony, reviews were positive. John Shulson of the *Virginia Gazette* described it as “filled with intensity, energy, excitement and a flurry of sounds both soft and otherwise, percussive and brass pronouncements, and endless rhythms. ... It's a piece of enormous power that moves from one emotional platform to the next.”

**Wynton Marsalis (1961- )**  
**Concerto for Tuba & Orchestra (2021)**  
Duration: ca. 25 minutes

Many of us think of Wynton Marsalis as the virtuoso, straight-ahead trumpeter who early in his career could swing effortlessly between the jazz and classical worlds, delivering *Autumn Leaves* with as much verve and confidence as a concerto by Haydn.

He was the Tiger Woods of music, and in 1983 – at age 22 – became the first artist to win simultaneous Grammy Awards in both jazz and classical genres. He repeated this feat again the following year.

What we don't always realize are his gifts as a composer, although he set a standard for original jazz works early on. He devoted *Majesty of the Blues* in 1989 to original tunes, and in 1997 won a Pulitzer Prize for his oratorio, *Blood on the Fields*.

Marsalis flexed his hybrid aesthetic further in 2019 with his *Violin Concerto*, and the next year, began writing for an instrument closer to home – the tuba. TFO offers its first performances of the *Concerto for Tuba*, with Principal Tuba TJ Graf making his debut as soloist.

The 25-minute concerto received its first performance in December 2021 by the Philadelphia Orchestra, which commissioned Marsalis to write a work he described as “getting down in the bass clef.” The ink on the score was barely dry when Graf and TFO Music Director Michael Francis chatted about doing it here at home.

“Michael and I were discussing options for programming and he threw this concerto out, even though it just had its world premiere the previous weekend,” Graf said. “I agreed to do it without even having heard it before. But I thought it would be fun to do, so I took a shot in the dark.”

Written in four sections, the concerto opens with *Up!*, an apt description of its energy. Graf not only plays his instrument, but “sings” through the mouthpiece – a technique known as multiphonics that you will hear again in the Ellington piece afterward – then offers a soaring melody that proves the tuba can be both subtle and virtuosic. The orchestra shows a hand of support with some rhythmic clapping before Graf rides to a close.

The next section, titled *Boogaloo Americana*, highlights a funky mix of blues and African-American dance rhythms, but woven into an orchestral palette. In the following *Lament*, Marsalis pays respects to the slow movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century concerto form, and writes a lyrical, introspective solo befitting a French horn. This *arioso* is the emotional center of the entire work.

Things go bebop in the finale, *In a Bird's Basement*, full of breaks and riffs that threaten to topple over harmonically, but not before the tuba grabs all the attention with its silver-quick passages and a brilliant coda.

**Duke Ellington (1899-1974)**  
**Black, Brown and Beige**  
Duration: ca. 18 minutes

“What we could not say openly, we expressed in music,” Duke Ellington said of the African-American musical tradition of his youth.

And in no other work does this ring so clear as his masterpiece, *Black, Brown and Beige*, an extended orchestral suite forged in part from the “white heat” of a people’s suffering and sorrow.

“It sits alone in the history of jazz,” Wynton Marsalis said of this three-movement creation, which was advertised as a swing symphony before its Carnegie Hall premiere in 1943. In attendance for that eagerly awaited first performance were Eleanor Roosevelt, Frank Sinatra, Count Basie and British conductor Leopold Stokowski. They had come to hear what was billed as a survey of African-American music designed to unify racial divisions and close the gap between European classical forms and native jazz.

That didn’t quite happen. The suite struggled for acceptance, with critics citing both its lack of formal structure and dearth of true jazz elements. Ellington responded to the negative reviews by saying, “Well, I guess they just didn’t dig it.”

But Ellington was always a step ahead of his public, and certainly his critics, and over the years *Black, Brown and Beige* would evolve alongside more informed and open-minded listeners. When Jazz at Lincoln Center, under Marsalis’ direction, issued a new recording of the work in 2018, it was heralded as one of the most significant compositions in American orchestra music.

It opens with the percussive *Black* in three short sections depicting long days in the antebellum South: *Work Song*, the spiritual *Come Sunday* and *Light*. Ellington described the first part as a “song of burden.”

*Brown*, also in three sections, includes *West Indian Dance*, *Emancipation Celebration* and *Blues*. It speaks of sacrifice and exclusion. The final movement, *Beige*, expresses the Black experience from the 1920s through the Second World War, and the beginning of a new, if challenging, era in American history. The music hits its climax in the ballad *Sugar Hill Penthouse*, considered one of Ellington’s finest bits of orchestration.

Quarter note: Ellington’s original score extends nearly 45 minutes, but TFO will play a shortened arrangement – 18 minutes – by Maurice Peress. Leading a field of recordings is a 2013 Naxos release by the Buffalo Philharmonic under the baton of JoAnn Falletta, who appeared as guest conductor with TFO in November.

### **George Gershwin (1898-1937)**

#### **An American in Paris**

Duration: ca. 16 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 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.”

Gershwin didn’t carry the weight of his European contemporaries in the world of music, but they admired him, taking note of this young “song plugger” from Brooklyn. His Broadway musicals, incomparable *Rhapsody in Blue* and Tin Pan Alley improvisations would help define not only the jazz age, but a new American orchestral sound.

In 1928 he traveled to France and soaked up the lifestyle, taking in the cafes, concerts, boulevard bustle and people. His impressions gave birth to his rhapsodic ballet *An American in Paris*, what one French writer described as “Jazzbo in Montparnasse.”

“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 into a lively metropolis, the strings mimicking the visitor’s stroll amid the sounds of taxi horns. Gershwin insisted on actual horns, not trumpets or trombones. TFO will use four horns with rubber bulbs, pitched in A flat, E flat, high D and low A.

Next comes a “walking theme,” as the American saunters by the river, then a bluesy section that expresses a bout of homesickness. Hints of the Charleston can be heard afterward, what the composer described as “a second fit of blues.” The work concludes with an invigorating stroll down the Champs-Élysées.

Gershwin knew he had a hit on his hands, and he was right. *An American in Paris* stands as one of the most performed and recorded orchestral pieces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and inspired the Academy-award winning film of 1951. But he reminded people not to take it too seriously.

“It’s not a Beethoven symphony, you know,” Gershwin said. “It’s a humorous piece, nothing solemn about it. It’s not intended to draw tears. If it pleases symphony audiences as a light, jolly piece, a series of impressions musically expressed, it succeeds.”

**Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based freelance writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.**