

Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Copland's Appalachian Spring

Michael Francis, *Conductor*

Jubilant Sykes, *Baritone*

Saturday, Oct 21, 2023, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm

Sunday, Oct 22, 2023, Ruth Eckerd Hall at 7:30 pm

Traditional (Arr. Mark Rice)	“Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child”
Traditional (Arr. Mark Rice)	“Were You There?”
Aaron Copland (1900-1990)	Old American Songs: 4. Simple Gifts 🎵
Aaron Copland	Appalachian Spring (Ballet for Martha) Suite for Orchestra 🎵
	<i>Intermission</i>
Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)	Slavonic Dances, Op.72

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Selected American Spirituals

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Simple Gifts

“This is a program about the American language,” says Michael Francis, Music Director of The Florida Orchestra. “And our language translates beautifully into musical form.”

A shining example is the Shaker melody *Simple Gifts*, an iconic tune famously woven into Aaron Copland’s 1944 masterpiece, *Appalachian Spring*, and published six years later in the first set of *Old American Songs*. Along with *The Boatmen’s Dance*, *The Dodger*, *Long Time Ago* and *I Bought Me a Cat*, *Simple Gifts* on this more intimate scale takes on the recitative quality of an opera aria, sung free of strict tempo markings. The lyrics are modest and unadorned:

*‘Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free
‘Tis the gift to come down where you ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
‘T’will be in the valley of love and delight.*

“For me, it’s about the true simplicity of life, and that this simplicity is a gift,” says Jubilant Sykes, guest baritone who sings in two TFO performances. “Against all the profound things in life, the passions, death and sickness that we all face, the song has taken on a new meaning for me.”

Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child (traditional)

The music of those enslaved throughout America’s history is an indelible part of our cultural legacy, today a stand-alone repertoire but one that fueled the sounds of gospel, jazz and blues. Whether religious or secular, these often-anonymous songs spoke of hope and longing, belief and despair, resignation and resistance, which together offered solace – and helped preserve the dignity – of displaced communities.

Although many of these traditional spirituals evolved as sacred hymns, others were practical, serving to synchronize the efforts of slaves working the fields under backbreaking conditions. Still others were born as entertainment, sung to accompany whatever simple instruments might have been available. *Slave Songs of the United States*, published in 1867, was the first and still the most important collection of these spirituals, and many are widely sung to this day.

One of the best-known is *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, which has woven itself into the American psyche in countless interpretations over the past 150 years. The song describes the pain of a slave being torn from his or her parents, with the word *sometimes* repeated as a reference to hope.

“Historically, these slaves had no mother, father, sister or brother because they were taken from their homes,” says Sykes. “It has such a plaintive melody and the lyrics are about life, and how sometimes it can be unbearable – the loneliness, the madness and darkness of it all. But it also means that I am never really alone. That’s what the song, for me, is about.”

Were You There? (traditional)

The song *Where You There?* was first published at the end of the 19th century in a book of plantation hymns and describes Jesus on the cross and how his suffering continues to transform people today. Charged with pathos and reverent feeling – with only a single line added to each successive stanza – its message is to be grateful for his sacrifice.

To further evoke Christ’s anguish, the song repeats the word *tremble* a dozen times, and no two performances are ever the same, evident in countless interpretations in popular culture, including those by Johnny Cash, Harry Belafonte and Willie Nelson.

“It’s a very old spiritual, and I first heard it in the sixth grade,” Sykes adds. “It asks, ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ It asks, ‘Would I have done this to this man who had such love in this heart?’ ”

Witness (traditional)

In the a cappella song *Witness*, the singer describes a slave’s faith in a higher power: “Marvel not, if you want to be wise; repent, believe and be baptized. Then you’ll be a witness for my Lord; soul is a witness for my Lord.”

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Appalachian Spring: Suite

Duration: ca. 35 minutes

With his 1944 ballet score *Appalachian Spring*, Aaron Copland became the most respected serious composer in America.

After experimenting with avant-garde styles, Copland had found his voice, at least one that comforted a public growing tired of academic formulas. *Appalachian Spring* was a breakthrough. He knew the rigorous music of the new generation of American composers would alienate audiences and further push composers from mainstream culture.

"I began to feel an increasing dissatisfaction with the relations of the music-loving public and the living composer," he once wrote. "It seemed to me that we composers were in danger of working in a vacuum. Moreover, an entirely new public had grown up around radio and the phonograph. It made no sense to ignore them."

Copland acted on his promise, producing a string of works that embraced his public: *El Salon Mexico*, *A Lincoln Portrait*, *Rodeo*, *Billy the Kind*, *Quiet City*, and what has remained his signature piece, *Fanfare for the Common Man*.

But it was *Appalachian Spring* where Copland set his most assertive tone, as its spacious and agreeable harmonies, delicate suspensions and tunefulness captured audiences wherever and whenever it appeared. The music resonated across America like few works of its day, and not surprisingly, won Copland the Pulitzer Prize a year after its premiere.

He composed the full ballet for Martha Grahams' dance company, and it tells the story of a young couple living on a farm in rural Pennsylvania in the early 1800s. The farmer and his bride share their hopes and fears, and Copland's clean, open scoring adds to the aura of the outdoors and nature.

The first 50 measures – all in the key of A – lend a tranquil quality to the music, along with spare textures, an absence of thickness and exotic coloring, and above all, a refined sense of clarity throughout. These same neo-primitive qualities permeate Copland's opera *The Tender Land*.

Originally written for 13 players (it was first performed in a small hall at the Library of Congress), the piece is most often heard as a suite, not unlike the symphonic excerpts from Bernstein's *West Side Story*. The most famous moment is the old Shaker hymn, *Simple Gifts*, introduced on the clarinet and taken up by the rest of the orchestra in a masterful set of variations.

"It's one of the most important American masterpieces," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "It's Copland's acceptance of the necessity and beauty of our American language, because in the language of a nation you find meaning. In that sense, it's a glorious piece of art."

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904)

Slavonic Dances, Op. 72

Duration: ca. 40 minutes

Before radio, records and television, composers made money by writing music amateurs could play at home, usually a family with a piano and a few hand-me-down fiddles. By crafting a simple arrangement for keyboard or string trio, having it published and sold in music stores, a composer could pick up enough cash to feed a family and pay the fuel oil bill through the winter.

Antonin Dvořák knew this as well as anyone. After the success of his pivotal *Moravian Duets* and first eight *Slavonic Dances*, Op. 46, which he arranged for four-hands piano as well as orchestra, his publisher, Franz Simrock, encouraged him to write more, which would become the *Slavonic Dances* Op. 72.

With the first two works in his back pocket, Dvořák went from unknown to renown. Shortly after Simrock printed the duets in 1878, Berlin's *National Zeitung* newspaper noted how it led to a "positive assault on the sheet music shops" and made Dvořák a household name "in the course of a day." The composer soon found himself besieged by requests from publishers and concert halls, and within months the second set of *Slavonic Dances* was being performed across Europe, England and the United States.

Certainly, not all the credit can go to the now-famous Czech composer. If it weren't for encouragement and support by the incomparable German master Johannes Brahms, Dvořák might have still been working in his father's butcher shop outside of Prague. Instead, he followed his musical passion and today ranks among the most-performed composers in the world, loved for his *New World Symphony*, *Cello Concerto*, *American String Quartet* and a plethora of other original and accessible works.

These magnificent creations may not have been born if not for Brahms, who saw such potential early on and took it upon himself to edit Dvořák's often sloppy scores. He also gave the young composer the nod in a career-making music competition that soon led to a lifetime engagement with Simrock. Not easily impressed, Brahms realized the "seemingly unlimited inventiveness of ... melodic materials, uncanny sense of time and duration and the dazzling sense of musical lines."

Such glowing words describe the Op. 72 dances, completed in 1887 with a deeper, more introspective feel than the rhythmically jubilant earlier set. Fueling the energy are diverse folk dances from Eastern Europe: the *Odzemek*, *Dumka*, *Skocná*, *Spacírka*, *Polonaise*, *Kolo*, and *Sousedská*. The set is sometimes listed in the order of 1 through 8, but you also might see them as 9 through 16 as a continuation of the first set of *Slavonic Dances*.

"They are amazing pieces," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "They are songs from villages in the Ukraine, Croatia and Bohemia. Each celebrates the beauty and power of these people. It's also one of the greatest showcases for an orchestra."

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