

## Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

# Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue

Michael Francis, *Conductor*  
Aldo López-Gavilán, *Piano*  
Natalie Hoe, *Clarinet*

Saturday, Feb 17, 2024, Mahaffey Theater at 8:00 pm  
Sunday, Feb 18, 2024, Mahaffey Theater at 2:00 pm

**Wynton Marsalis**  
(b. 1961)

**Mason Bates**  
(b. 1977)

**Leonard Bernstein**  
(1918-1990)

**Igor Stravinsky**  
(1882-1971)

**George Gershwin**  
(1898-1937)

**Herald, Holler & Hallelujah: Fanfare for Brass & Percussion \***

**Alternative Energy for Orchestra & Electronica ♪**

Fords' Farm, 1896 –  
Chicago, 2012  
Xianjiang Province, 2112 –  
Reykjavik, 2222

*Intermission*

**Three Dance Episodes from On The Town ♪**

I. The Great Lover  
II. Lonely Town (Pas de deux)  
III. Times Square: 1944

**Ebony Concerto ♪**  
Natalie Hoe, *clarinet*

**Rhapsody in Blue**  
Aldo López-Gavilán, *piano*

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### **Wynton Marsalis (1961- )**

#### ***Herald, Holler & Hallelujah: Fanfare for Brass & Percussion***

Duration: ca. 5 minutes

Many of us view 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 last winter TFO offered its first performance of his freshly composed *Concerto for Tuba*.

The orchestra returns to Marsalis this season with *Herald, Holler & Hallelujah*, a fanfare for brass and percussion. Co-commissioned in 2021 by seven orchestras, the five-minute work opens with a subdued chorus before adventuring into sonic peaks and valleys of varying dynamics, shades and tempos.

Although ripe with original riffs, the work pays homage to Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown and Beige*, as well as Aaron Copland's famed *Fanfare for the Common Man*. The last couple of minutes kick into a swing band mode and draw energy from the jazz funeral tradition of New Orleans, where Marsalis was born.

The work also serves as a bookend to the closing piece on this program, says TFO Music Director Michael Francis: "It's written in an iconic jazz style that's the modern incarnation of Gershwin."

### **Mason Bates (1977- )**

#### ***Alternative Energy***

Duration: ca. 27 minutes

Florida Orchestra audiences are getting to know Mason Bates, the young American composer known for his electro-acoustic mash-ups. We heard his *Cello Concerto* during the 2019-20 season, and his amplified *Mothership* made its mark on the opening program the following September.

Now, the orchestra has invited Bates back for *Alternative Energy*, which presents its own technical challenges in requiring a conductor's laptop, monitors for the musicians, speakers on stage and acoustic premixing. Listeners can expect the unexpected, says TFO Music Director Michael Francis.

"This piece is going to rock," he says. "It's all about green energy and the nature of energy, about where we are and where we'll be in the future. It's a wonderful potpourri in the way it unites popular and classical language."

Composer-in-residence at the Kennedy Center, Bates is in demand by orchestras wanting to attract younger audiences and build future repertoire. "When I'm writing music for the concert hall, I go after what is the most pregnant music possibility, not just the outreach component," he says. "Older subscribers go along because they can tell I have roots in classical music. But listeners enjoy the collision of an old medium with sounds that could be on their iPod."

Bates describes *Alternative Energy* as an "energy symphony" spanning different time scales over four movements. He says it begins in the American Midwest in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and "travels through ever greater and more powerful forces of energy — a present-day particle collider, a futuristic Chinese nuclear plant — until it reaches a future Icelandic rainforest, where humanity's last inhabitants seek a return to a simpler way of life."

A melody is first heard on the violin, then followed by a "phantom orchestra" that trails the soloist like a ghost. The accelerando cranking of a car motor becomes a special motif in the piece, a kind of rhythmic embodiment of ever-more-powerful energy, the composer adds. The next movement takes us to present-day Chicago, with actual recorded sounds from the Fermilab particle collider.

In the next movement, we zoom a century into the future to an eerie wasteland in China, where a lone flute sings a distorted version of the fiddle tune heard earlier. Then comes a catastrophic meltdown, and as the smoke clears, we are in an Icelandic rainforest on a hotter, more dangerous planet. The piece ends, Bates says, with a gentle, out-of-tune pizzicato on the violin in a quiet plea for a less complicated life.

### **Leonard Bernstein (1918-90)**

#### ***Three Dance Episodes from On the Town***

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

If you happened to be reading the *New York Times* on June 7, 1944, news of the Normandy invasion dominated the paper, patched together through reports from overseas. But on page 14 was a small notice, far removed from the weight of war, that read: "With tunes by Leonard Bernstein, young conductor and composer, a new musical comedy entitled *On the Town* will be placed in rehearsal late in August."

*On the Town* was a turning point for Bernstein, as it broke ground on a number of fronts. It was the first American musical composed by a symphonist; the first to group interracial dancers together on a stage in New York; and the first musical to be bought by a film company sight unseen, according to Humphrey Burton's 1994 biography on Bernstein. It also is music that helped define the composer's personality: vivacious, boisterous and carefree.

The lighthearted story follows three sailors on a one-day shore leave in New York, and their fast-paced exploits to find a trio of available women. The musical found a larger audience in the 1949 film of the same name, featuring Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Jules Munshin.

The music opens with *Dance of the Great Lover*, grabbing listeners with a series of jarring chords from the brass choir. This episode depicts the sailor

Gabey, asleep on a subway and dreaming of having an affair with Miss Turnstiles. The percolating rhythms and jazzy woodwinds are pure Bernstein, and midway through he borrows a bit from Gershwin's *American in Paris*.

In the second episode, *Pas de Deux*, Gabey watches a scene that Bernstein notes as "both tender and sinister, in which a sensitive high-school girl in Central Park is lured and then cast off by a worldly sailor." The dance is set in *Lonely Town*, and its spaciousness and ting of melancholy remind us of Aaron Copland.

The finale, *Times Square Ballet*, kicks off with a rollicking clarinet solo and drums that Bernstein describes as "a more panoramic sequence in which all the sailors congregate in Times Square for their night of fun." This episode includes snippets from *New York, New York*, *it's a Helluva Town*, the musical's best-known song.

### **Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)**

#### ***Ebony Concerto***

Duration: ca. 10 minutes

This is The Florida Orchestra's first-ever performance of Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto*, composed in 1945 for Woody Herman's big band. It might seem odd that the Russian master would write in a popular American vein, but he admired what he heard while living in Los Angeles, and this exhilarating work shows the quirky side of an otherwise sober composer.

Like the Gershwin that follows, the *Ebony Concerto* redefined what we expect from conventional forms. After its premiere, purists in both the jazz and classical camps were at odds over its attempts to swing, and early recordings and performances reveal musicians struggling to reconcile such a hybrid work.

Although *Ebony* is indeed jazzy, Stravinsky structured it on the three-movement, fast-slow-fast scaffolding of a Bach *Brandenburg Concerto*. And like those Baroque gems, the soloist – in this case, the clarinet – is less a protagonist than a player within a small group. Pay special attention as soloist Natalie Hoe blends her instrument *with* her partners, not so much above or beyond them, as was the custom in the old form known as the concerto grosso.

The opening movement shows Stravinsky in a frisky mood, the musicians playing nervous, ostinato fragments rather than singing lines. A bluesy middle movement in F minor could be mistaken for a page from Bernstein's *On the Town* (also on this program), and ends by shifting gears into F Major. The finale, a theme with short variations, wraps up with clarinet and brass playing in a simpatico chorus that trails off in a soft close.

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

#### ***Rhapsody in Blue***

Duration: ca. 16 minutes

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of George Gershwin's iconic *Rhapsody in Blue*, a work that fused American jazz with European classical traditions and forced people to rethink the concert experience.

Today, *Rhapsody* is etched into the cultural landscape as arguably the single most-played work by an American composer. It resides in the repertoire of every orchestra, sells plane tickets on television, and inspired Woody Allen to write his 1979 film, *Manhattan*.

"Everything that came before on this program sets us up for the Gershwin and its amazing musical heritage," says TFO Music Director Michael Francis. "I wanted to put it on a pedestal because it deserves to be there."

In a program titled *An Experiment in Modern Music*, the work premiered on Feb. 12, 1924 at Aeolian Hall in New York, with Gershwin at the keyboard and Paul Whitman leading the orchestra. The lineup included *Limehouse Blues* and *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, along with pieces by Victor Herbert, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern and the English composer Edward Elgar.

But everyone – including such notables as Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Leopold Stokowski, John Philip Sousa and Fritz Kreisler – were surprised at what came next. After intermission, a slim, well-dressed, 20s-something Jewish man walked on stage and sat at the piano. Suddenly, the sound of a bluesy clarinet snaked through the air, a lilting glissando stretching 2-1/2 octaves, a sound nobody had heard before.

From that moment on, this bluesy improvisation was a smash, both in performance and on record, so much so that Gershwin could have lived the rest of his life off the royalties alone. Like *American in Paris*, it depicts the verve of city life, of New York in particular, notes Howard Pollack in his book *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*. It evokes "the hurdy-gurdies of the Lower East Side, the calliopes of Coney Island, the player pianos of Harlem, the chugging of trains leaving Grand Central Station, the noisy construction of midtown skyscrapers."

The piece has been revised over the years, but as Leonard Bernstein once said, it always holds up: "You can cut out parts of it without affecting the whole in any way except to make it shorter. You can remove any of these stuck-together sections and the piece still goes on as bravely as before. You can even interchange these sections with one another and no harm done. ... It's still *Rhapsody in Blue*."

**Kurt Loft is a freelance journalist, member of the Music Critics Association of North America and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.**