

Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra Program Notes and Musings

Opening Night: Rhapsody in Blue

October 19, 2019 – 5:30PM

Stilian Kirov, Conductor

Xiayin Wang, Piano

HORST (Composer-in-Residence) *Ukko* (World Premiere)

LEROY ANDERSON Piano Concerto

GERSHWIN Rhapsody in Blue

PISTON Symphony No. 6

Ukko (World Premiere)

Martha C. Horst

During 2015-2016, my family and I lived in Finland. We learned much about their language, culture, and history. This work loosely attempts to depict Ukko, who is the god of thunder in Finnish folk religion. Ukkonen, the Finnish word for thunder or a thunderstorm, is the diminutive form of the name Ukko. Ukko is in ABA form. Throughout this work, I used percussion strikes to depict the sound of thunder. The work opens with brass and percussion strikes alternating with fast string passages. The middle part of the work features a prominent timpani part, along with percussion and string bass tremolos, against muted string undulations. This texture is meant to mimic the sound of thunder and wind heard from a distance. The opening motive returns – this time in a polyphonic texture. After an ascending string passage, the brass and percussion take over for a thunderous conclusion.

~Martha C. Horst, 2019-20 Composer-in-Residence

Piano Concerto in C

Leroy Anderson

IPO plays Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride" almost every year as part of our Holiday Pops concert. He's famous for his many light classical hits such as "Belle of the Ball," "Blue Tango," "Bugler's Holiday," "Forgotten Dreams," "Horse and Buggy," "Plink, Plank, Plunk!," "Serenata," "The Typewriter," and "Waltzing Cat." Since Anderson's forte was light music, one might make the mistake that he was some sort of lightweight when it came to intellect. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Anderson was born on June 29, 1908, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His parents were Swedish immigrants who had come to the United States as children. Anderson was not only gifted in music-

playing piano, organ, double bass, trombone and tuba during high school and college, and picking up the cello well enough as a postgraduate to play in a string quartet—he was gifted in languages. Anderson mastered Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, German, French, Italian, and Portuguese in addition to the English and Swedish of his upbringing. At Harvard, Anderson majored in music, studying both orchestration and composition with Walter Piston (remember that name). Despite graduating with many honors (B.A. 1929, M.A. 1930), he was unsure about a career in music and became a language tutor.

During WWII, his language skills were very important for the Army. Anderson was inducted as a private, but soon worked his way up to become Chief of the Scandinavian Department of Military Intelligence. After the War, the Army wanted Anderson to become military attaché to Sweden, but by that time, he had already sent his “Syncopated Clock” and “Promenade” to Arthur Fiedler of the Boston Pops, and with those successes, decided to give music a second chance.

The Piano Concerto in C is Anderson’s only endeavor in the extended musical forms. It was premiered at Grant Park in Chicago in 1953 with Anderson conducting and pianist Eugene Liszt as soloist. Evidently, the reviews were not great, and Anderson withdrew the piece. As Anderson’s wife, Eleanor, tells the story:

In the early '70s, my husband played a recording of the piece and said, "That's not bad, maybe I should do something with it." Since he's not here to make changes, I finally decided [in 1988 after Anderson’s death in 1975] to let it be played as it was in 1953.

In 2007 our current Composer-in-Residence, Martha Horst, gave the pre-concert lecture for an IPO concert featuring a Bach concerto and the Rachmaninov Second Symphony. She described this as a menu containing both “sushi and a banana split.” Perhaps, that’s a bit harsh regarding Rachmaninov—I remember Horst explicating his musical processes very well—but the Anderson Concerto is truly like having a banana split with your friends at the 8th-grade sock hop. Probably it’s not the deepest human experience, but all the “fun” synapses are firing full blast.

In the *Guys and Dolls* Havana scene, the innocent but tipsy Sarah exclaims that Dulce de Leche "would be a wonderful way to get children to drink milk." Similarly, the Anderson Concerto would be a great, painless way to teach musical forms. The Concerto is in three movements. The first is a perfect sonata form, the second in ABA form with a coda and the third a sort of rondo-sonata.

The Concerto begins (“Allegro Moderato” moderately fast) with a portentous-sounding, brief introduction in minor. Soon, a fresh and open, C-major first theme in the strings follows. The piano introduces the beautiful second theme which has a blues note in its final phrase. The cellos take this up, and the development section is presaged by the introduction music. It features phrases of the opening theme elaborated in minor and then most cheekily, a jazzy fugue(!) based on the phrase of the second theme. The recap, with the themes in order, follows, as the form prescribes, with the solo horn taking up the second theme and the coda leading to a solo cadenza which ties directly to the second movement (“Andante” a walking pace). A pretty, sentimentally four-square theme in the strings and then the piano opens this movement. The “B” section is a more rapid variation on the theme but in a

samba beat pounded out by claves. Anderson artfully places the original theme on top of this rhythm and, then with the “A” section, the full-throated melody returns. The coda brings back the claves.

The last movement (“Allegro vivo,” Fast, alive) opens with a piano recitative shadowed phrase by phrase by--the snare drum! A bouncing, music-hall accompaniment supports the rondo theme which has a square-dance vibe. (Remember the finale of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto that we will hear later in the year which also has a marked rusticity.) The first (mildly) contrasting episode is led by a jazzy trumpet over the on-going bouncy rhythm. As prescribed, the rondo theme returns which leads to a Rachmaninov-light theme (really a rondo theme phrase in augmentation) over a more subtle syncopated rhythm. The “development” has the rondo theme modulating around for a bit leading to a brief marching-band passage which actually brings back the opening movement’s introduction! The piano has a solo cadenza of the “Rachy” theme. Then a rondo-flavored coda closes the piece.

Rhapsody in Blue **George Gershwin**

Leonard Bernstein famously complained of how difficult it was to write a hit—some tune of his that he could hear people whistling in the restaurant. These musings were contained in a 1955 essay, “Why don’t you run upstairs and write a nice Gershwin tune?” There, he was comparing his career to that of George Gershwin. Bernstein felt that because he came from a classical background, there always was an element of personal expression—perhaps an urge that required him to add unpopular touches to make things “interesting” (for himself and his classically inclined colleagues) and develop the music like a real “composer.”

This Bernstein contrasts with the Tin Pan Alley-to-classical route taken by Gershwin whom, Bernstein called one of the greatest melodists--ranking him with Tchaikovsky, Schubert, and other greats. Yet, with Gershwin, Bernstein claims, after the immortal tunes, there is not a lot of original development or transitions. The notes don’t follow each other inevitably. He is particularly blunt about *Rhapsody in Blue* claiming that as long as the four themes or tunes which he describes as “terrific—inspired, God given...beautiful” are kept intact, the piece can be cut, expanded with cadenzas, or even reworked with sections in different orders and, “It’s still ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’”

This might be a text-book example of “sour grapes”: “since I can’t be a hit composer, being a hit composer is not being a ‘great’ composer after all.” In rebuttal, one could say that a “rhapsody” is not supposed to be highly organized or integrated but a moment-to-moment fantasy. (Also, Bernstein was soon to have a big hit in *West Side Story*, so the Gershwin envy became less intense.)

The fact that Gershwin’s themes ingeniously fit together like Lego blocks means that certainly one can remove a block or two, shift them around, and reconnect the remaining blocks, and the piece still works.

Gershwin had been commissioned to write a jazz concerto for a concert called, “Experiment in Modern Music,” to be held in New York City’s Aeolian Hall on February 12, 1924. Conductor and organizer Paul

Whiteman wanted to make the case for the role of jazz in the formation of new symphonic music. Unfortunately, Gershwin either hadn't thought he agreed to the commission or had forgotten about it in the midst of preparing a new musical (*Sweet Little Devil*). When an article in January the month before the concert proclaimed that Gershwin was at work on the piece, it was shown to Gershwin by his brother, Ira.

In the manner well known to Mozart and Rossini, last-minute pressure can be quite productive for composers. And since much of *Rhapsody* really consists of solo piano cadenzas (to be played by Gershwin, a great improviser), he mostly had to notate the ensemble parts (which were orchestrated by Ferde Grofe). Gershwin did much of the composing work on the train traveling to prepare the musical, and it's easy to hear some train rhythms in the first quarter of the piece.

It's not necessary to analyze *Rhapsody in Blue*. There are introductions of jazzy themes with multiple episodes including train, Latin-band, blues march, etc. Two thirds in, there is a broad "love" theme (well known to TV viewers watching United Airlines commercials) followed by a more virtuosic cadenza and then a big reprise of the initial themes.

Was it a hit? Was it influential? Is it still beloved the world over? Is the Pope a Jesuit? (Yes.)

Symphony No. 6

Walter Piston

Walter Hamor Piston Jr. was born in Rockland, Maine in 1894. His paternal grandfather's name was Antonio Pistone and, as a sailor, had emigrated from Genoa, Italy. (He soon Americanized this to Anthony Piston.) Yet, the Piston Italian heritage was essentially "erased" by the time of Walter's birth according to Piston's great student, composer Elliot Carter. So, the cliché of Piston being a New England WASP is not inaccurate. At age eleven, Walter moved with his family to the Boston area from Maine. But the Maine characteristics of taciturnity and sobriety were woven into the Walter Piston psyche. (Think "Murder She Wrote" and not the Boston teens from "Saturday Night Live."). Being a man of few words didn't mean without wit, however, and Piston was famous for his. He even joked that his grandfather, Antonio, came to Maine to get experience. (His paternal grandmother's maiden name was Experience Hamor.)

While all his formal training as a youth was in draftsmanship and architectural drawings, young Walter taught himself the violin and the piano, skills which got him jobs playing in theater orchestras and dance bands. He also taught himself the saxophone, learning this in a matter of days, and he subsequently played in the Navy band during WWI. Despite his early work as a draftsman, including a job with the Boston Elevated Rail Company, Piston supported himself after WWI by his musical activities.

After more formal piano and violin studies, Piston enrolled in a special counterpoint course at Harvard University in 1919. He subsequently completed a degree summa cum laude in 1924 and earned a fellowship to study with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Boulanger typically would enroll her composition students in her very rigorous harmony course but felt this was superfluous for Piston. (Remember our

discussion of Aaron Copland and how his studies with Boulanger in the 1920s resulted in his Symphony for Organ and Orchestra which was commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It was performed by the Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra in 2017.) Piston also studied composition with French composer Paul Dukas. Upon returning, Piston accepted a position at Harvard where he remained until 1960—having at one point been Chair of the Department of Music.

Piston is probably as well known for his pedagogical works (Principles of Harmonic Analysis, 1933; Harmony, 1st edition 1941; Counterpoint, 1947; and Orchestration, 1955) as he is for his musical compositions. He is also known for his many famous students which included Elliot Carter, Leonard Bernstein—and Charles Amenta. (Actually, I wasn't his student, but I did take a course based on his Harmony when I was in high school—and still have the book.) Yet, despitefully being an academic, he was quite prolific as a composer—mostly from commissions. His output includes eight symphonies. Symphony No. 3 won the Pulitzer Prize in 1948, and he won a second Pulitzer in 1961 for his Symphony No. 7. Piston also produced numerous concertos (including a wonderful Viola Concerto, 1957 as well as the Cello Variations, 1966, written for Rostropovich) and much chamber music. With Piston's background in draftsmanship, his published scores are often just facsimiles of his perfect manuscripts. He also did essentially all the illustrations for his book on orchestration.

The Symphony No 6 (1955) was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (which over the years commissioned 11 Piston works) in honor of its 75th anniversary. It was dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky. The BSO music director, Charles Munch, premiered the Symphony No. 6 on November 25th, 1955 and also took the Piston Symphony on tour as the BSO became the first American orchestra to play in the Soviet Union in 1956. (The Soviet composer Kabalevsky reviewed the piece very favorably, and the USSR State Symphony Orchestra, under its music director, Alexander Gauk, actually recorded the Symphony in 1962 which may be my favorite recording of this work. (Imagine that within seven years of its premiere, a modern American symphony was recorded by a Soviet orchestra at the height of the Cold War.)

Piston stated that he wrote the Symphony No. 6 with exactly the sound of the BSO instrumentalists in mind. With his typical effusiveness-NOT-he describes the work:

Little need be said in advance about the Symphony. The headings listed on the program page are indicative of the general character of each movement. The first movement is flowing and expressive, in sonata form; the second a scherzo, light and fast; the third a serene Adagio, theme one played by solo cello, theme two by the solo flute; and the fourth an energetic finale with two contrasting themes. The Symphony was composed with no intent other than to make music to be played and listened to.

With my Midwestern garrulousness, we can go into a lot more detail to help the listener navigate the piece. The first movement has the unusual tempo marking "Fluendo espressivo (flowing expressive) quarter equals 112" (the latter which is like "Allegretto" or a little fast). (Did I not mention that Piston was fluent in several languages including Italian?). Piston, with a great economy of expression, gets through a full sonata form—including introduction and coda—in about 6 ½ minutes

The first movement opens with the low strings and woodwinds on a full-measure, unison “c” with a little alternating-note figure to that “c” in the third measure. This simple sound world is the landmark of what I would call the “Introduction” which is somewhat dark and in A minor (ish). It lasts about 30 seconds. What I would call the first theme proper is in the high strings and almost seems like a gushing A-major climax. But as per the Piston personality, this is a “modified limited hangout” and the harmonies go from thirds to fourths, giving this rising theme a bit of a modern edge. It starts to tumble downward about 30 seconds later to a longer transition with forceful bass-drum strokes and more rapidly alternating notes—first in the brass, then in the woodwinds, and finally in the strings. Things quiet down and a pair of harps with high strings usher in the second theme group in the woodwinds starting with the flute. The individual woodwinds soon start trilling in their passages (the most rapid possible alternation of notes—see where we’re going here?). The development deals with working out of only the introduction. As expected, this darkness leads back to the sunburst of the opening theme as a recap. The percussive transition and harp-lead second theme follow as expected in sonata form, and the movement ends softly with the murmurs of the introduction as the coda.

The second movement “*Leggerissimo vivace*” (very light and lively) features flying stings scurrying about muted and very quiet--punctuated by percussion. It seems very American but hard to know why. A hoe down for spiders? A whispering auctioneer? The strings make patterns and imitative, contrapuntive entries which are joined by what seems to be a woodwind chorale in slower augmentation of the strings. But this is not a chorale and the strings dominate louder without the mutes until the percussion makes more of an impact two-thirds in, but the strings weave their web to close the movement.

The heart of the Symphony is the third movement *Adagio sereno* (slow, serene) which, at 10 minutes in duration, lasts about as long as the first two movements combined. It is organized around two theme groups similar to the slow movements in Beethoven’s 5th and 9th Symphonies or the “Adagio” of Bruckner’s 9th Symphony. That said, even a rapid performance of the “Adagio” of the Beethoven’s 9th, like David Danzmayr’s at the IPO several years ago, takes about 13 minutes. The movement opens with a slow saraband-like rhythm in the low strings. A beautiful, solo cello melody arises from this which is elaborated by the oboe and the strings. If we think we are getting away from the territory of “Theme One” the “saraband” rhythm in the winds tells us that we are still there. The tempo picks up a bit for the second theme group which is presented by the solo flute beginning with two alternating notes. The English horn joins in and the flute repeats its melody, but the saraband is back in the low strings to reprise theme one—this time in a discourse started by the first violins. The strings all join in and the horns repeat the saraband rhythm. The repeat of the theme two groups is introduced by the harps and the violas get their moment in the sun singing out the original flute melody. This builds to a climax and the saraband rhythm seems to menace, but the hope of the cello melody returns to end the movement quietly.

Spoiler alert, the last movement doesn’t end quietly, and it only takes about as long as the short second movement. The tempo is “*Allegro energetico*” (Fast, energetic or should I say “energized.”) There is a joyous fanfare-like opening theme that definitely has an American feel—maybe like a hoe-down in the Grand Canyon. The contrasting theme is a softer, long rising and falling melody in the strings. The development is a full out fugal exposition of the opening--beginning in the horns and bassoons and

carried throughout all the sections of the orchestra. The themes return in rapid fashion for the promised abrupt and loud ending.

~Notes by Chuck Amenta, MD
IPO Board member and Chair of the Artistic Committee