Overture to Candide

Leonard Bernstein
(b. 1918, Lawrence, Massachusetts; d. 1990, New York City)

Leonard Bernstein always said he wanted to write “the Great American Opera.” He probably came closest with Candide (1956), which he labeled “a comic operetta.” Based on Voltaire’s satirical novel of 1759, it chronicles the misadventures of Candide, a naive, pure-hearted youth, and his much more tough-minded sweetheart, Cunégonde. Although Candide has been taught by his tutor Dr. Pangloss (here Voltaire was taking a jab at the optimistic philosophy of his contemporary Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz) that “all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds,” throughout the story he is assailed by legions of man-made and natural disasters that sorely test this theory. Finally, older, a little wiser, he and the equally battered Cunégonde are reunited, with much more modest aspirations for their life together. For Bernstein, collaborating with the admired playwright Lillian Hellman, this story had contemporary relevance for an artificially happy post-war America, recently bedeviled by the McCarthy witch-hunts.

Opening on Broadway on December 1, 1956, Candide was perhaps a bit too intellectually weighty for its first audiences and closed after just 73 performances. Bernstein was less concerned over the money lost than the failure of a work he cared about deeply. The critics had extolled its marvelous score, and Bernstein and others kept tinkering with the show over the years. With each revival, Candide won bigger audiences. In 1989, the already seriously ill Bernstein spent his last ounce of vital energy recording a new concert version of the work. “There’s more of me in that piece than anything else I’ve done,” he said.

From the very beginning, though, the Overture was a hit and swiftly became one of the most popular of all concert curtain-raisers. Brilliantly written and scored, flying at breakneck speed, it pumps up the adrenaline of players and listeners alike. It features two of the show’s big tunes: the sweeping, romantic one is Candide’s and Cunégonde’s love duet “Oh, Happy We,” while the wacky, up-tempo music is from Cunégonde’s fabulous send-up of coloratura-soprano arias, “Glitter and Be Gay.”

Mandolin Concerto, “From the Blue Ridge” [World Premiere]

Commissioned by the Roanoke Symphony Orchestra, David Stewart Wiley Music Director. This is the world premiere performance, approximately 18 minutes in duration.

Jeff Midkiff
(b. 1963, Roanoke, Virginia)

My love for playing the mandolin, and a lifetime doing so, began to take on new meaning and motivation just a few years ago. After decades of also performing as a clarinetist, and countless orchestral concerts, I felt a deep-seated desire to bring my favorite instrument
in line with that experience. I truly enjoy the amazing color, language and structure of the symphony orchestra, and my many years as a clarinetist made me very familiar with it. At the same time, I enjoyed a highly improvisational approach to the mandolin that was uniquely my own. I had struggled to keep the two – orchestra and mandolin – a “safe” distance apart. But I knew in my heart that I could say something with the mandolin on a symphonic scale. My excitement and motivation for this concerto started with the idea that I could bring my most natural companion to the symphonic stage – two seemingly different worlds, together.

With RSO Music Director & Conductor David Stewart Wiley, I found an invaluable resource and ear for the process. From our first conversations about how such a new mandolin concerto could communicate, I received immediate understanding and grasp of my mission, and it was a good fit for his program ideas for the RSO’s season. His enthusiasm about the piece, from the beginning, remained a vital part of the collaborative process. David’s musical genius was more than handy in combing through the complexities of composing – what could work well and what probably couldn’t. Thank you David.

The commission for the piece came in November of 2010, and it was then that the falling leaves drew the opening musical scene. The first of three movements (Allegro) begins with the mandolin on swirling sixteenth notes, setting the stage for excitement and anticipation, as does the entire movement. Indeed, the Blue Ridge’s beauty, and importance to me, would form the piece. The middle of the first movement moves from D-Minor to the relative key of B-Flat Major with woodwinds in a waltz-like dance, before we return to the first (fast) theme. Although the movement ends quickly, there is a final unexpected fade with a long held single note in the clarinets – an echo of the diminuendo ending of the great Dvorák symphony also on tonight’s program.

The lyrical and slow second movement draws on more typical and familiar bluegrass melodies. Having grown up in Roanoke, moved away, and returned, I wanted the concerto to echo the emotions associated with home, and with going home to Roanoke. To get there, I looked to the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Roanoke Valley. “Wildwood Flower” by the Carter Family, and Bill Monroe’s “Roanoke” are my thematic inspirations, along with Dvorak’s own "Goin' Home" theme. A haunting fiddle tune from the mandolin (accompanied by the oboe) paints a picture of longing before the journey is complete. The end of the movement is resolved with major thirds returning from the “Roanoke” theme, an improvisational-sounding piccolo solo, and a final statement from the mandolin flowing into the final movement over a halo of strings.

The final movement, is an upbeat, improvisational and dynamic affair. It draws strongly upon jazz and bluegrass themes in a series of ideas in a “controlled jam session” with one idea smoothly leading to another. With each turn, the orchestra has a virtuosic role to play, with percussion and mandolin setting the course. Following a traditional bluegrass section,
we hear an extended cadenza for mandolin and violin, and the full orchestra joins for a funky mixed-meter blues riff. Another brief mandolin cadenza serves as the final bridge to the concerto’s bright, and up-tempo conclusion.

—Jeff Midkiff, September, 2011

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, “From the New World”

Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 was last performed by the RSO in October 1995 at Maestro Wiley’s debut concert as Music Director candidate.

**Antonín Dvořák**

(b. 1841, Nelahozeves, Bohemia (now Czech Republic); d. 1904, Prague)

At its premiere in the newly opened Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893, Dvořák’s last symphony, “From the New World,” was perhaps the greatest triumph of the composer's career, and it has continued to rank among the most popular of all symphonies. Yet from its first reviews, commentators have asked the question: “Is this symphony really American?” In other words, how much is it “from the new world” and how much “from the old world”?

In 1892, Mrs. Jeannette Thurber, a devoted music patron and wife of an American multimillionaire businessman, had lured Dvořák to New York City to become director of her new National Conservatory of Music. She chose well, for not only was Dvořák one of Europe’s most celebrated composers, but more importantly he brought fine teaching skills and an openness to the potential of American music. “I did not come to America to interpret Beethoven or Wagner for the public,” he stated. “I came to discover what young Americans had in them and to help them express it.”

A man who drew on his Czech peasant roots both for personal values and artistic inspiration, Dvořák found much to treasure in American folk traditions. While white Americans were inclined to undervalue the spirituals of black Americans, Dvořák was enraptured by them. One of his students was Harry T. Burleigh, an African American with a fine baritone voice who was to become an important arranger of spirituals and writer of American art songs. As Burleigh remembered, Dvořák “literally saturated himself with Negro song... I sang our Negro songs for him very often, and before he wrote his own themes, he filled himself with the spirit of the old Spirituals.” Although pointing out the resemblance between the second theme in the first movement of the “New World” and the opening of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” Burleigh stressed, as did Dvořák himself, that the Czech did not actually quote from American tunes but used them to inspire his own original themes. Later the process came full circle when another Dvořák pupil William Arms Fisher created a popular quasi-spiritual, “Goin’ Home,” from Dvořák’s magnificent English horn melody in the “New World’s” slow movement.

With his sensitive antennae, Dvořák absorbed the vitality and brashness of America in the 1890s (“The enthusiasm of most Americans for all things new is apparently without limit. It is the essence of what is called ‘push’—American push,” he observed) as well as the soulfulness of spirituals, and all this influenced his new symphony of “impressions and greetings from the

Continued
New World.” “I should never have written the symphony as I have if I hadn’t seen America,” he declared. The drive of the first and last movements as well as the syncopated rhythms and melodic shapes of many of the themes did indeed give this symphony a unique voice. But, as Burleigh wrote, “the workmanship and treatment of the themes ... is Bohemian” — Dvorák is here, as always, the proud Czech patriot. The fruitful mixture of American inspiration and Czech sensibility is best summed up by the fact that both Americans and Czechs consider this symphony their own.

The first movement’s slow introduction hints at the principal theme, which, as the tempo quickens to Allegro molto, is introduced by the horns. Motto-like, this theme will recur in all four movements. Dvorák seems to capture the spirit of “American push” in this driving, optimistic music. Listen for the hints of “Swing Low” in the second theme, a merry tune for flutes and oboes. A prodigious melodist, Dvorák also offers a third theme in the solo flute, bright and full of “can-do” spirit.

The Largo slow movement is one of the most beautiful Dvorák ever wrote. Here is the great “Goin’ Home” melody for English horn, an instrument chosen by the composer because it reminded him of Burleigh’s baritone voice. The composer loved Longfellow’s poem “Song of Hiawatha” and claimed that this music was inspired by the death of Hiawatha’s bride, but many, including Dvorák’s sons, heard more of his homesickness for his native land here. A poignant middle section in the minor presents two hauntingly wistful melodies for woodwinds above shuddering strings.

Dvorák also cited “a feast in the woods where the Indians dance” from “Hiawatha” as influencing the third-movement scherzo. But it is far easier to detect European influences in this spirited dance movement, which summons memories of the composer’s greatest idols, Beethoven and Schubert: Beethoven for the opening recalling the Ninth Symphony’s scherzo and Schubert for the ebullient trio section, sparkling with triangle.

The finale boasts a proudly ringing theme for the brass that propels its loose sonata form. But its development section brings back the first movement “motto” theme as well as the Largo’s “Goin’ Home” and a snatch of the scherzo. At the end, the home key of E minor brightens to E major. Dvorák’s final magical touch in a loud, exuberant close is a surprise last chord that fades to silence.

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