

PROGRAM NOTES

Monty Carter, Program Annotator

Morton Gould (1913-1996):

Star Spangled Overture, from *American Ballads* (1976)

How is it that **Morton Gould** is not a household name? Major orchestras everywhere toss pop into their concert seasons to help draw audiences, and Broadway, film and jazz have some open doors in the symphony anyway. But the music of Morton Gould is a *synthesis* between symphonic repertoire and popular music. We lap it right up and feel swank when we do.

And we're not talking about a little boogie-woogie and some II-V-I hopscotch. That wouldn't cause Gould to be championed by a who's-who of famous conductors from Leopold Stokowski to Arturo Toscanini to Georg Solti, as he certainly was. No, Gould combined formal structure and masterful orchestration with American popular idioms in ways that compliment both.

By the age of 8 Morton was performing in radio broadcasts in New York and was awarded a scholarship at the Institute of Musical Arts, soon to be known as the Juilliard School. Following his studies there and at New York U, Morton's real-world education came from a combo that today's music students can only imagine: theatre, vaudeville, and radio. He was a keyboard whiz, a masterful song spinner, and at the age of 21, an orchestra director. His radio career was the perfect progression and the ideal outlet for his popular arrangements and original works.

Morton Gould's bright and brisk **Star Spangled Overture** is the opening selection of *American Ballads*, a half-dozen national chestnuts, as he called them, of marches and wiggles, hope and inspiration, composed for the United States Bicentennial.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990):

Our Town: Music from the Film Score (1940)

You already knew that movies began as silent films. "Talkies" weren't around till the late 20's. What you may not have known is that **music** has *always* accompanied movies.

Some of us in the Saint Joseph Symphony sure wish we could've tried our hand at that kind of gig, whether on piano, organ, or in an ensemble. There were two things you had to have: (1.) your wits about you; and (2.) a huge reserve of music motives and themes for all scenes: lovey-dovey, dark suspense, march-into-battle, slapstick – or be ready to improvise them on the spot!

The first feature film score was composed by French composer Camille Saint-Saëns in 1908, and it was sent around with the movie reels for live performances in theaters!

Fast forward thirty years to American composer Aaron Copland. He's perhaps better known now for his ballets and orchestra pieces, but the recognition he received for film scores such as *Of Mice and Men* helped him believe that he could truly make a living as a creative artist.

Writing the music for *Our Town* felt as natural for Copland as Thornton Wilder felt writing the original play. "The composer," Copland said, "is in a special position to appreciate what music does to a film because he sees it first without any music. Movie audiences may not consciously realize they are listening to music when they view a film, but it works in their emotions nonetheless." Copland dedicated this suite of music from the film to Leonard Bernstein.

Charles Ives (1874-1954):

The Unanswered Question (1903)

If you overhear a musician saying, “Or maybe I should sell insurance,” it’s not a pathetic comment ... at least not if it’s in reference to Charles Ives.

Ives made a fortune as an insurance executive, but he started composing in his teens with the enthusiastic support of his music director dad. It wasn’t unusual for the boy to play a baseball game in the afternoon and an organ recital in the evening. Ives went on to pursue music at Yale and then began settling into the organist/choirmaster/composer/teacher life like his chilly music theory professor, Horatio Parker.

But the settling wasn’t settled. As Ives put it, if a composer “has a nice wife and some nice children, how can he let them starve on his dissonances?” Tired of being a nonstop gig monkey, Ives turned his back on the profession and went on to found one of the most successful insurance companies in the country, initiating the concept of estate planning, and composing decades-forward music on the commuter train and at home on weekends.

In *The Unanswered Question*, a four-minute piece he wrote years before that, “the flutes and other human beings,” as he put it, hunt for “The Invisible Answer.” The trumpet intones “The Perennial Question of Existence,” and the strings ... um, well, the strings are Silent Druids “who Know, See, and Hear Nothing.” (Yes, ALL the strings, not just the violas.) As always, to *really hear* music worth hearing, take the wise advice of Charles Ives: “**Stretch your ears.**”

John Williams (b. 1932):

The Cowboys Overture (1972)

The Cowboys are schoolboys who learn to rope, brand, and herd cattle – and avenge the death of their master, portrayed by John Wayne. They were accompanied by the galloping, open-sky sounds of John Towner Williams, a film score buckaroo who had two dozen movies under his belt (the tally today is over a hundred). This was a little while before he met his movie match-made-in-heaven, Steven Spielberg. And it was five years before he single-handedly returned symphonically-centered soundtracks to prominence (instead of pop song soundtracks), scoring music for a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920):

The White Peacock from *Roman Sketches*, Op. 7 (1915, orchestrated 1919)

And now for some exquisite American Impressionism. When Charles Tomlinson Griffes was a kid, he took piano lessons with his sister, Katharine. Later he pursued piano at Elmira College with Mary Selena Broughton, who financed a trip to Berlin so that he could continue his studies there when he was 19. Charles was a brilliant pianist and presumed destined for a solo career by the folks at home, but in Europe he was captivated by Impressionism – composing it, that is, not performing it in cut-throat competitions. Returning to the U.S. in 1907 upon the death of his father, Charles dove into composition and teaching, for which he also had a passion. He made sweet use of his very short time on earth, passing away at age 35 from influenza.

Griffes had a fascination with *pavo cristatus*; he saw his first pure white peacock at a zoo in Berlin and was captivated by its beauty and also by the Eastern mysticism that celebrates it. *The White Peacock*, a poem by Fiona MacLeod (the alias of William Sharp) inspired the piano piece that Griffes composed by the same name in 1915. Four years later, he orchestrated it for a ballet and wrote that it pictured “a wonderful garden filled with gorgeous color, where a white peacock moves about slowly *as the soul, as the breath of all this beauty*. The music tries to evoke the thousand colors of the garden and the almost weird beauty of the peacock amid these surroundings.

George Gershwin (1898-1937):

Second Rhapsody for Piano and Orchestra (1931)

We kicked the evening off with a whiz-bang of popular music in orchestral essence, by a composer who deserves to be better known. Our finale with piano virtuoso Hyperion Knight is *music* that deserves to be better known, by a big name that could stand to have more symphonic celebrity. (You can refer to George Gershwin as a piano man who wrote a few things for orchestra, as long as you say the same about Beethoven.)

George and his brother Ira were asked to write songs for *Delicious*, a Fox movie released in 1931 about the life and loves of a Russian pianist/composer emigrating to the States and trying to pen a New York rhapsody. The rhapsody heard in the movie is Gershwin's, which he completed months before the movie was scripted. Apart from the opening downtown "rivet" theme, the music isn't 'about' anything. As Gershwin's biographer Edward Jablonski noted, the music's allure comes not from *what* it is, but *who*: "**It is Gershwin around the corner.** He had left the twenties. The self-styled 'modern romantic' created a work that is more modern than romantic." If this Rhapsody doesn't sound much like its Blue-hued predecessor, it's because it inhabits a whole new world.