1998-10-29

Boston University Symphony Orchestra, Thursday, October 29, 1998

Boston University School for the Arts
Music Division

—presents—

BOSTON UNIVERSITY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

DAVID HOOSE, *conductor*

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Thursday, October 29, 1998 at 8:00 p.m.
The Tsai Performance Center
685 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts

BOSTON UNIVERSITY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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PROGRAM

Catfish Row: Symphonic Suite from *Porgy and Bess* — George Gershwin (1898-193)

- Catfish Row
- Porgy Sings
- Fugue
- Hurricane
- Good Mornin' Sistuh!

—Intermission—

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune — Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105 — Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

In one movement

Program Notes

George Gershwin (1898-1937)
Catfish Row: Symphonic Suite from *Porgy and Bess*

Catfish Row
Porgy Sings
Fugue
Hurricane
Good Mornin' Sistuh!

In 1924 Edwin Du Bose Heyward wrote *Porgy,* his first book, and as it turned out, his greatest success. He found the idea for the plot in a newspaper article about a maimed black man who had committed murder at the height of passion. Gershwin read the novel two years after its publication, but nine years were to pass until Heyward and Gershwin collaborated to write the opera *Porgy and Bess* with the help of Ira Gershwin and Heyward's wife Dorothy. Contrary to popular thought, Gershwin orchestrated the score himself.

Porgy and Bess, Gershwin's crowning achievement, is a stylistic synthesis of Italian romantic opera, French impressionism, and the pseudo-jazz of the twenties and thirties. The opera reflects his personal reaction to the Gullah community, located at Folly Beach in South Carolina. Catfish Row is the fictional name assigned to a street on James Island, an actual island largely inhabited by Gullahs – a group of African-Americans descended from natives of African seacoast towns.

To Gershwin's great disappointment, the Boston tryout of Porgy *and Bess* on September 30, 1935 at the Colonial Theatre and the subsequent New York premiere on October 10 received a lukewarm critical response. Hoping to salvage some of the opera's best passages, Gershwin fashioned a five-section suite. In the meantime, the opera gained in popularity despite the negative press, and the suite languished, remaining virtually unheard. In contrast, the orchestral arrangement of music from the opera by Robert Russell Bennett, *Symphonic Picture,* written in 1941 at the request of Fritz Reiner, became world-renowned. In 1953 Ira Gershwin revived his brother's little-known suite, named it *Catfish Row,* and the piece became a favorite in the American orchestral repertoire.

Gershwin's version begins with a compression of the entire opening of the opera up through the famous lullaby "Summertime." The second section contains Porgy's "I Got Plenty o'Nuthin'" and the duet "Bess You is My Woman Now." Next comes a fugue depicting the death of Crown, followed by the "Hurricane" from the opening of Act III. The closing movement, "Good Mornin', Sistuh!," includes themes from "Sure to go to Heaven" and the finale, "Lord, I'm on my Way".

This year's centennial celebration of Gershwin's birth affords us an opportunity to reflect on the output of this gifted American composer who wrote and published for less than twenty years. Gershwin, appraising his career at the end of the twenties, called himself 'a man without traditions.' "Music must reflect the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time," he said. "My people are American. My time is today." These remarks resonate strongly with *Porgy and Bess;* its melodies sound as fresh in 1998 as they did over thirty years ago.

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun)

Claude Debussy and George Gershwin were very different artists, but they do share some interesting points of contact. Like Gershwin's *Porgy,* Debussy's *Prelude à'apres-midi d'un faune* was composed in response to a piece of literature, in this case a poem by the same name by the symbolist poet, Stephane Mallarmé. Like Gershwin, Debussy considered himself a something of a nationalist, often adding the phrase "musicien francais" to his name. Both men focused not on the past but on the present. The harmonic and melodic innovations of Debussy contributed to the demise of nineteenth-century styles in general and Wagnerism in particular, even though the young Debussy was a devoted Wagnerian. Also, and perhaps most important, while Debussy's harmonic language was very different from Gershwin's, both composers had a remarkable sense of harmonic fluidity. Finally, just as Boston hosted the first hearing of *Porgy and Bess,* so too it was the site of the U. S. premiere of Debussy's *Faun,* where it was performed in 1902 with Georges Longy conducting the Boston Orchestra Club.

Debussy's relatively small orchestral output, comprised of only five major compositions, is inversely proportional to the impact of his music upon subsequent composers, Gershwin included. Boulez noted some of Debussy's last works are "almost more astonishing than the final works of Webern." Even an early work like *Faun* is astonishing in many ways. Debussy intended originally to create a rhapsodic symphony in three parts. Entitled *Prelude, Interlude et Paraphrase Finale pour 'L'Apres-midi d'un faune,'* the work was to be premiered on March 1, 1894 on an all-Debussy concert in Brussels. Deeming it not ready for performance, Debussy withdrew it from the program; the *Prelude* alone was first performed December 22, 1894 at a concert of the Societe Nationale to great acclaim, while the second and third parts, which had never grown beyond sketches, were abandoned.

Afterward, Mallarmé sent Debussy this note: "Your illustration of the *Apres-midi d'un faune* creates no dissonance with my text except that it

ventures much further, truly, into nostalgia, light, ... with finesse, uneasiness, with exuberance (....)" The writer Rene Peter even claimed that Mallarme thought, "I had myself set it to music: it is a transposition du *meme au meme.*" Nijinsky choreographed *Faun* for the Ballet Russe in 1913, and although greeted with hisses at the premier owing to Nijinksy's sensual performance, it became a set piece for the dancer for the rest of his career.

The tonal ambiguity that predominates in the 108 bar score creates a fluid sense of constantly shifting colors. The opening murmur from the flute permeates the whole piece, serving as an obvious reminder of the faun's flute. After a harp glissando, a horn call sounds, followed by a shimmering presentation of the opening phrase through tremolos in the muted strings. Rather than developing the phrase, Debussy refracts it through ever-changing harmonies. The oboe plays a new theme more melodically sculpted than the first, but it too dissolves. Then the entire woodwind section presents another lyrical idea leading toward the climax of the work. At the conclusion the [illegible]al mood returns via a pianissimo fragment of the flute motif set within a [illegible]w harmonic frame. But, the intent behind this motif is to evoke, not depict Mallarme's poem. As Debussy replied to a critic: " *'Le Prélude a L'après-midi d'un faune,'* ... is perhaps what is left of the dream at the bottom of a faun's flute."

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)
Symphony No. 7 in C major

The mature Jean Sibelius continued the tradition set in motion by nationalists of the nineteenth-century. Finnish by birth, he articulated a Scandinavian spirit in music by seeking expression through a profoundly human musical language, not through direct quotation of folk-song. Fundamentally traditional in its harmonic usage and rooted in a sense of classical form, Sibelius' music stands at the threshold of the modern musical world. His Seventh and last symphony, a late work, is extraordinary because here Sibelius steps outside of his self-imposed conventions to achieve unity on new terms. Indeed, the remarkable formal fluidity of the symphony complements the sort of harmonic fluidity in the music of Gershwin and Debussy.

When Sibelius conducted the first performance of his Seventh Symphony in Stockholm in 1924, the work was still called *Fantasia sinfonica,* an appropriate title for a single- movement orchestral piece. The biographer, Robert Layton has declared that Sibelius' Seventh represents a consummation [illegible]he nineteenth-century search for symphonic unity: "The progression within [illegible]Seventh Symphony is so highly integrated that the outward course it

takes does not illuminate the vital organic processes that compel it on its path. The sense of growth and metamorphosis of themes is only one part of the process, though a highly important one." Organic cohesion results from Sibelius' treatment of his many thematic ideas; although there is little exact repetition, there are many subtle relationships among the themes. The listener is barely conscious of the precise means whereby metamorphosis takes place, sensing instead an inevitable logic in the progress from the opening themes featuring strings and trombone in turn, to the melody of the heroic closing.

Sibelius stopped composing in 1924 and, much like Rossini, maintained his silence for the rest of his long life. (An Eighth Symphony was contemplated, but whatever Sibelius might have completed, he probably destroyed.) His music enjoyed immense popularity in the first half of the century, especially in the England, Germany, and the United States. Virgil Thomson, however, in his first season as music critic of the New York *Herald Tribune*, decried Sibelius as antiquated, a view embraced by several later critics. A visionary work like the Seventh Symphony suggests that they were dead wrong.

—Karen Ruymann

Upcoming Events

October 30
8:00 p.m.

Boston University Chamber Orchestra
Kostis Protopapas, *conductor*
Michalis Economou, *conductor*
Tsai Performance Center
685 Commonwealth Avenue

November 1
8:00 p.m.

Faculty Concert
Laura Ahlbeck, *oboe*
Shiela Kibbe, *piano*
Michelle LaCourse, *viola*
Richard Ranti, *bassoon*
Tsai Performance Center
685 Commonwealth Avenue

Boston University Symphony Orchestra

Violin I
Christine Ribbeck, *Concertmaster*
Chiyoko Mizumura
Gillian Clements
Yoojin Kim
Hilary Foster
Katherine Winterstein
Joo-Mee Lee
Jessica Platt
Marie LeCarlier
Mark Berger
Shu-Fang Du
Hilary Smith
Elise Dalleska
Joong Hoon Song
Kaveh Saidi
Kenji Furakawa

Violin II
Daniel Han, *Principal*
Mary Kim
Brenda van der Merwe
Kimberly Griffith
Christina Eng
Alexia Taylor
Audinga Aukstikalnyte
Elizabeth Ryu
Tylor Neist
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Andra Voldins
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Melinda Hirsch
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Andrea Holz
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Heidi Kayser

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Elizabeth Browne, *Principal*
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Emily Yang
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Double Bass
George Speed, *Principal*
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Meredith Johnson
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Irving Steinberg

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Linda Krueger*
Boaz Meirovitch+
Jordi Tarrus^
Amy Dombach
Anne Wong

Oboe
Bernadette Avila*
Andrew Price+
Cui Tong^

English Horn
Marea Chernoff

Clarinet
Kai-Yun Lu*+
Jocelyn Langworthy^
Katie Leaman

Bass Clarinet
Holly Hamilton

Bassoon
Shinyee Na*+
Lou Ann Pfeil^
Gabriel Beavers

Horn
Gabrielle Finck*
Mary Jo Neher+^
Jeanne Weisman
Elizabeth Regas
Oliver de Clercq
Sheffra Spiridopoulas

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Michael Zonshine*^
James Leach
Koji Nakaya
Jo Ann Lamolino

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Nat Dickey*
Peter Charig^
Greg Spiridopolous
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Avital Handler

Timpani
Zhanna Maysyuk*
Matthew Persing^

Percussion
Courtney McDonald+^
Michael Chang

Harp
Franziska Huhn
Yu-Hsin Huang

Piano
Hsiang Tu

Banjo
Robert Sullivan

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*Principal in Sibelius
+Principal in Debussy
^ Principal in Gershwin

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