George Walker

LYRIC FOR STRINGS

Born in Washington, D.C., June 27, 1922
Died in Montclair, New Jersey,
August 23, 2018
Last performed by the Wichita Symphony
December 10/11, 1994

Most people in the audience this weekend may be encountering the music of George Walker for the first time. *The Lyric for Strings*, Walker's most performed work is an appropriate introduction as it makes a long overdue appearance on a Wichita Symphony program.

Described by one writer as "an under-heard American Master," George Walker's was a "trailblazer" in a career full of firsts for an African-American musician: one of the first to graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music (1945), first to give a Town Hall debut recital on piano (1945), perform as a soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra (1946), and win a Pulitzer Prize (1995).

Born in Washington, DC, into a family where music was encouraged and practiced by both parents, Walker began piano studies at the age of five, entered Oberlin College when only 15, and subsequently gained acceptance into the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia where he studied piano under Rudolf Serkin and composition with Rosario Scalero, who also taught Samuel Barber and Gian-Carlo Menotti.

The initial emphasis of Walker's career was to pursue the life of a concert pianist, but racial barriers prevented him from making headway in his career. While piano remained an important part of Walker's career, his interest in musical composition turned serious after graduating from Curtis. He went to Europe and studied with Nadia Boulanger. Upon returning to the States, he earned his Doctoral degree in composition from the Eastman School of Music.

Teaching was the third component of Walker's life in music. He enjoyed positions at Smith College, the University of Colorado, and most importantly at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where he taught for twenty-three years until his retirement in 1992.

Walker's list of compositions includes over 100 works covering a wide range of genres, from sonatas, quartets, art songs, choral works, to symphonic works. He received numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1996 for *Lilacs,* a work for voice and orchestra based on poetry by Walt Whitman. Many leading orchestras and organizations including the Boston Symphony, Cleveland Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and the Pew Charitable Trust commissioned works from Walker. In 1999 George Walker was elected into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the following year was inducted into the American Classical Music Hall of Fame. At the time of his death in 2018, he was looking forward to the premiere of his Sinfonia no. 5 by the Seattle Symphony.

Walker composed his brief, hauntingly beautiful ***Lyric for Strings*** in 1946 and premiered it with a student orchestra at the Curtis Institute conducted by Seymour Lipkin. Conductor Richard Bales presented it in a more formal premiere the following year during the annual American Music Festival at the National Gallery

of Art in Washington. Like Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, a work that will draw immediate comparisons to this piece, Walker originally conceived *Lyric* as the slow movement of his First String Quartet. He dedicated both the String Quartet and *Lyric for Strings* to the memory of his grandmother, who passed away while Walker was a student at Curtis.

Walker's compositional style hails from the music of the past, including his beloved Beethoven and 19th-century masters, 20th-century sources such as Debussy and Stravinsky, as well as African American spirituals and jazz. The music never comes across as a collage of source material, but always speaks with Walker's unique musical voice.

Lyric opens with a short introductory phrase of staggered string entries as the music descends through a chord of F-sharp that blends the major and minor versions of the chord. The main theme begins in the violins and is echoed in turn by the other strings. The tempo is *molto adagio* (very slow) and conveys a mournful, but affectionate emotion. The imitative writing is effective, and the cellos and basses provide a firm underpinning on F-sharp. A brief and contrasting homophonic, or chordal, texture with modal harmonies interrupts the motion and provides a moment of pause and reflection. The use of contrasting textures and reference to modal harmonies are reminiscent of Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, a work that influenced several composers during the middle of the 20th century, including Walker and Barber. After the chords, Walker returns to his contrapuntal texture as the music ascends to the climax. We hear another passage of chords, followed by a variation of the first idea in which triplet rhythms now contribute to a feeling of acceleration. After reaching a second forte climax, the work ends quietly with the homophonic texture.

Jennifer Higdon

HARP CONCERTO

Born in Brooklyn, New York, December 31, 1962

First performances by the Wichita Symphony

From the Composer

I love writing concerti because it gives me a chance to not only explore the different instruments' qualities, but also because I get to experience the joy of the performer in displaying those qualities. Yolanda Kondonassis' enthusiasm for her instrument is infectious. In order to show off the wonderful aspects of this grand instrument, I have created a 4-movement work:

First Light seemed an appropriate title for the first musical glimpse of the harp. Lyrical and stunningly elegant in its solitary quiet, the music moves through musical conversations with various soloists and sections of the orchestra.

Joy Ride is a romp through rollicking moods that shift constantly, carrying the soloist through dialogues with first the string section, then the wind section, followed by the percussion and then brass. This movement is all about joy.

The Lullaby movement is designed as a chamber work; no orchestral sections play in this movement. The first collaborating instruments are the flute and viola, in honor of the first piece where I really became aware of the harp, the Debussy Trio.

The final movement, *Rap Knock*, is named for the opening sounds played by the harpist. Most people associate the harp with having a "lyrical/heavenly" quality, but I wanted to also allow the enthusiastic rhythmic color of this instrument to emerge. This movement is a real race to the end.

The *Harp Concerto* was commissioned and premiered by the Rochester Philharmonic. It was co-commissioned by the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra, the Fargo-Moorhead Symphony Orchestra, the Harrisburg Symphony Orchestra and the Oklahoma City Philharmonic. A recording of the Harp Concerto can be found on a CD titled American Rapture on the Azica label. This recording has been nominated for two 2020 Grammys—Best Contemporary Classical Composition and Best Classical Instrumental Solo.

The *Harp Concerto* was written for and is dedicated to Yolanda Kondonassis.

Antonin Dvořák

SYMPHONY NO. 9 IN E MINOR, OP. 95 "FROM THE NEW WORLD"

Born in Nelahozeves, Czech Republic, September 8, 1841
Died in Prague, Czech Republic, May 1, 1904
Last performed by the Wichita Symphony February 15/16, 2014

It was a coup. For the grandiose sum of $15,000 and a two-year contract, Jeannette Thurber, wife of wholesale grocery magnate Francis Beattie Thurber, lured one of Europe's best-known composers, Antonin Dvořák, away from his beloved Prague to become the Director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. After Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Johann Strauss in the United States, Dvořák was considered by Americans, the best-known living composer in Europe.

Viewed from the perspective of American culture, Dvořák was the perfect "fit." Represented by the East Coast cultural hubs of New York and Boston, American cultural society in the 1890s was dominated by Germanic and Central European influences. Not only did Dvořák represent the best of this cultural model, but he was also a nationalist who had successfully woven elements and stylistic traits of his native Bohemia into his music.

Nationalism and the search for an American identity were hot topics of the day in the United States. Just beginning to emerge as a world power, the rise of Teddy Roosevelt and the American Century were only a few years away, and already the stage was being set.

The debate of what constituted an American "flavor" in music was well underway. On the one hand, there were the conservative exponents, such as composer John Knowles Paine. Occasionally smacking of racism, this contingent held onto European cultural models, decrying cultural nationalism as "quasi-barbaric." On the other side were the nationalists, represented by music critic Henry Krehbiel, who espoused American resources such as Indian and African American musical idioms. To the nationalists, Dvořák was a perfect and willing "pitchman." Having overcome the obstacles of a rustic background and as one of an oppressed minority under Austrian Habsburg rule, Americans viewed Dvořák as a "triumph of manifest destiny" fulfilled by "an exercise of traits of mind and character that has always been peculiarly the admiration of American manhood."

SATURDAY, APRIL 4 @ 7:30 PM

SUNDAY, APRIL 5 @ 3:00 PM

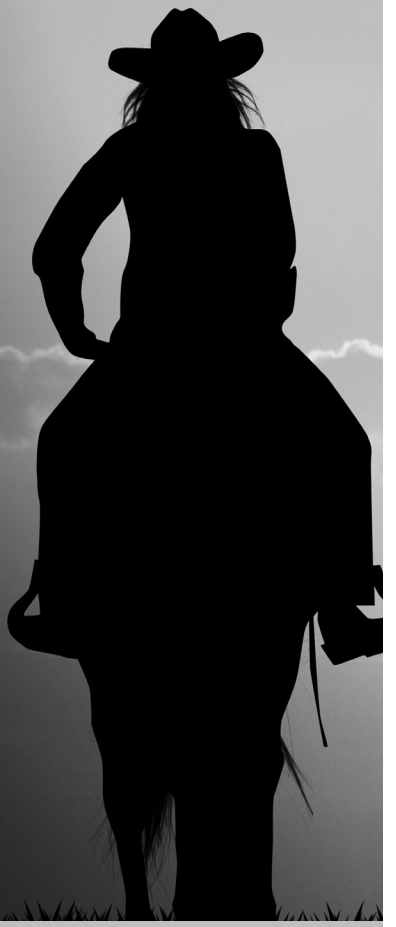
MASTERWORKS

THE ROSE OF SONORA

Holly Mulcahy, violin
Nicholas Bardonnay, photographer & multimedia artist
Wichita Symphony
Wichita Symphony Sonora Sirs

JOHN WILLIAMS The Cowboys Overture
GEORGE S. CLINTON The Rose of Sonora, a Violin Concerto in Five Scenes
BARBER Adagio for Strings
COPLAND Rodeo: Four Dance Episodes

Hold on to your hat as the Concert Hall transforms into the rugged frontier! Copland's iconic *Rodeo* comes to life on the big screen as behind-the-scenes footage from an action-packed rodeo is projected above the WSO for a lively visual experience to match the toe-tapping music. WSO Concertmaster Holly Mulcahy is joined by a cowboy chorus for *The Rose of Sonora*, a cinematic violin concerto in five scenes depicting freedom, love, betrayal, and vengeance in the wild west.



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Writing in *Century Magazine*, Krehbiel hailed the arrival of Dvořák to New York in September 1892. "In Dvořák and his works is to be found a twofold encouragement for the group of native musicians whose accomplishments of late have seemed to herald the rise of a school of American composers…There is measureless comfort in the prospect which the example of Dvořák has opened up."

The New York City to which Dvořák arrived in September 1892 was a bustling, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan city. With skyscrapers rising, the city of the 20th century was beginning to form. Dvořák settled into his five-room apartment at 327 E. 17th St., just down the street from the Thurber's National Conservatory.

Established in 1885, the conservatory had already gained a distinguished faculty, which included the composers Horatio Parker, Rubin Goldmark, and cellist/composer Victor Herbert. The faculty, urged on by Jeannette Thurber and her agenda, promoted music education and the use of American idioms. Significantly, the school awarded scholarships to women and minorities, and counted several African Americans among the students. Thurber had even won a Congressional Charter for the school in 1891 with a concert featuring the music of Dudley Buck and John Knowles Paine.

By 1892, the surrounding city had already become one of the world's cultural centers. Carnegie Hall opened in 1891. Under the leadership of Anton Seidl, a German immigrant and one of the leading conductors of the day, the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera enjoyed world-class status. Seidl befriended American composers, most notably Edward McDowell, and extolled the virtues of American music while encouraging music education. Numerous publications and critics discussed music in lengthy and detailed articles, often citing actual musical examples. There was a segment of readers who were not only hungry for musical enlightenment, but who also understood what they read.

Dvořák began to immerse himself in American culture. He enjoyed Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and learned the songs of Stephen Foster. Harry T. Burleigh, one of Dvořák's African American students, was a frequent guest at the Dvořák home and spent many hours introducing Dvořák to spirituals. At the encouragement of Jeannette Thurber, Dvořák re-read Henry Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha*, a work which he had read many years before in a Czech translation. Thurber hoped for an American opera on *Hiawatha*. For a while, Dvořák contemplated the project. Immersed in this new American culture, a new symphony in E minor began to occupy his thoughts. Thurber encouraged him, asking him "to write a symphony embodying his experiences and feelings in America."

Dvořák worked on the symphony throughout the winter of 1893, finishing most of it in the spring. Seeking a break from the commotion of New York, Dvořák sought a summer refuge in the small Bohemian community of Spillville, Iowa, in the northeast corner of the state, not far from Decorah. Here, he completed the symphony and the orchestration. While he was pleased to be amongst his kin and the rural atmosphere he so loved, he also found the vast, open countryside of Iowa to be "strange." He wrote to friends back home that the

landscape was very "wild and sometimes very sad – sad to the point of despair."

Sensing his role as a spokesman for American nationalism in music, Dvořák published an article entitled "On the Real Value of Negro Melodies" that appeared on May 21, 1893, in the *New York Herald*. He wrote, "I am now satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called Negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States." He had the spirituals sung to him by Burleigh in mind. What he could not have known at the time was that his statement would be borne out shortly by the emergence and development of that uniquely American musical idiom – jazz.

The critics and members of the press looked forward to the premiere of the new symphony with great anticipation. On the day of the first public rehearsal, December 15, 1893, Henry Krehbiel's essay appearing in the *Tribune* extolled the "American" qualities of the new work. Dvořák had already added fuel to the nationalism debate by suggesting that the *Song of Hiawatha* inspired elements of the second and third movements. He hinted at further links between African American melodies and thematic material of the musical themes. In one interview with the press, Dvořák explained that "anyone with 'a nose' can readily feel the influence of American music." And to further stimulate the discussion, he appended to the score the title "From the New World" shortly before sending the score to Anton Seidl for rehearsals.

Following the open rehearsal of December, the symphony was officially premiered by the New York Philharmonic under Seidl at Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893. It was a huge success. The public applauded Dvořák sitting in his box. He wrote to his publisher Simrock that he had to "show my gratitude like a king from the box in which I sat." Henry T. Finck, reviewing the work for the New York Evening Post, wrote, "Anyone who heard it could not deny that it is the greatest symphonic work ever composed in this country… A masterwork has been added to the symphonic literature."

Henry Krehbiel continued to build his case for Americanism in the press by extolling the virtues of Dvořák's themes. "We believe that in addition to the evidence of their Americanisms… [the themes] contain spirited proclamations that fall with peculiar agreeableness into the American mind and heart." In particular, he pointed to a flute solo in the first movement, which seemed reminiscent of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Others tried to interpret the references to *Hiawatha*. Did the second movement relate to *Hiawatha's* wooing of Minnehaha? Or did it convey feelings of grief at Minnehaha's grave? Or was it about "a lonely night on the edge of a forest." Of course, Dvořák wasn't giving any specifics.

Others were not so sure about the claims of the nationalists. Some heard characteristics of generic folk music in general, including American and Czech. One critic detected a certain Celtic quality to the themes and suggested that perhaps the symphony might be called the "Tammany Hall Symphony." Writing for the *Musical Courier,* James Huneker

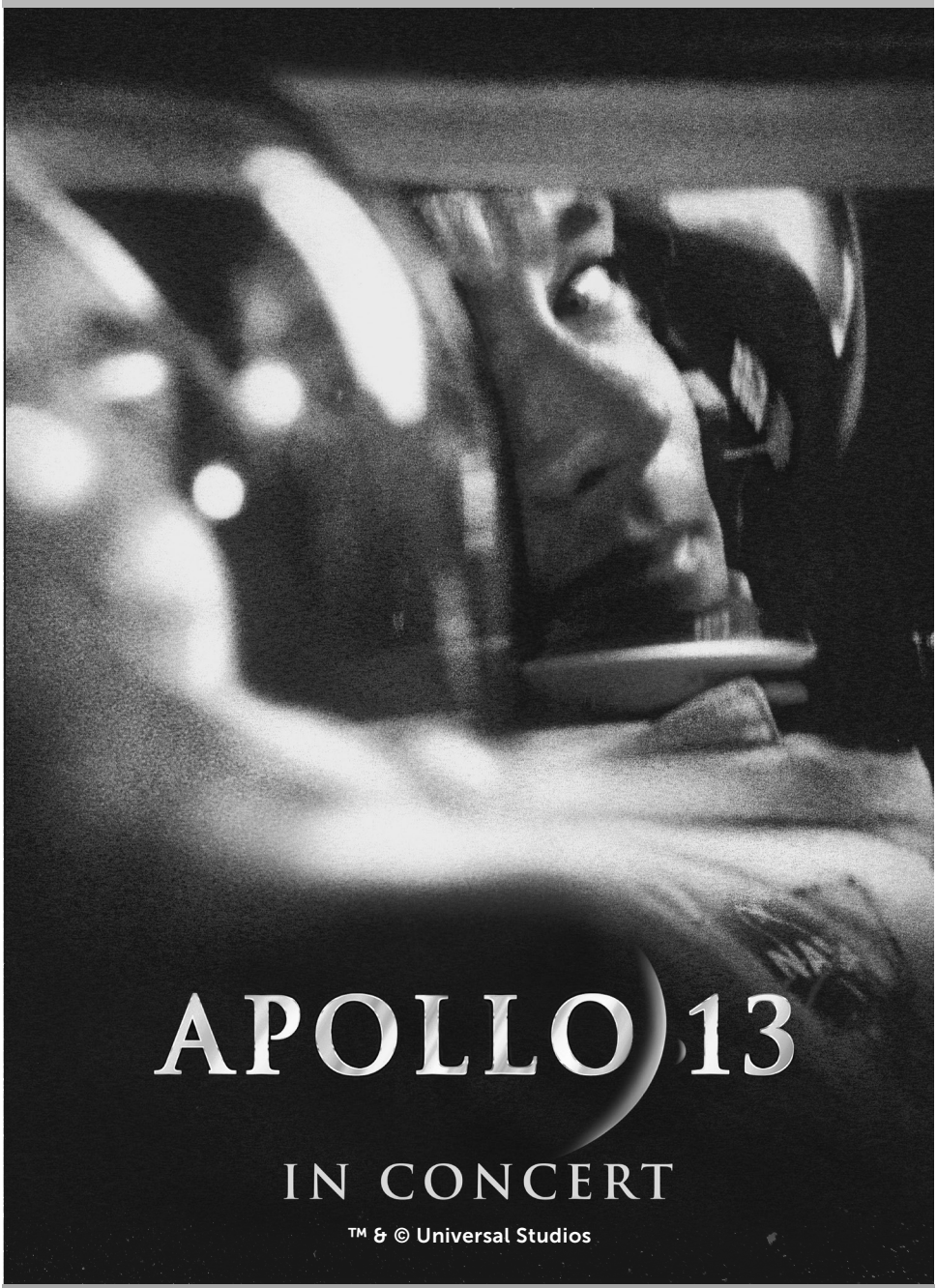
heard a "sense of loneliness of enormous perspective" in the second movement, but certainly no specific American traits. He complimented the "naïve, sunny and fertile qualities" of the music comparing it to Franz Schubert. He went on to praise Dvořák "for not giving us huge doses of pessimism we find in the spirit of Brahms and Tchaikovsky." Huneker recognized that Dvořák had created a lasting work: "The so-called 'American Symphony' will be an enormous favorite with the public and will doubtless be played all over the world."

Conductor Anton Seidl, remembering his German roots, commented, "It is not a good name, New World Symphony! It is homesickness, home longing." Adding confusion to the debate, one of Dvořák's American students, William Fisher, arranged the English horn solo of the second movement for chorus, and called it "Going Home." While capturing a sense of nostalgia for home, it became so popular that it entered the lexicon of American folk music apart from any connection to the symphony. Over the years since, many have thought that the melody came first and that Dvořák had quoted it! Years later, Dvořák's assistant in America, J.J. Kovarik related that the "New World" title had caused quite a stir and that many still believed that Dvořák had imprinted "an American seal" to his work with the title. Instead, it was merely one of Dvořák's "innocent jokes" and meant nothing more than "impressions and greetings from the New World." Dvořák seemed to be amused by all of the attention the work received in the press, and according to Kovarik, smiled and said, "It looks as if I got them confused quite a bit. Back home, they'll know what I meant." In 1900 Dvořák wrote to Oscar Nedbal, who was about to conduct the premiere of the symphony in Berlin: "I am sending you Kretzschmar's analysis of the symphony, but ignore all that nonsense about my having used 'Indian' or 'American' tunes – it is a lie. I merely tried to write music in the spirit of the American national melodies."

Dvořák was one of the great assimilators of folk idioms, whether they were of his native Bohemia or America, and he inspired American composers to think about their native music. How much of the *New World Symphony* is American and how much is Czech depends on the listeners, who will hear what they want in the music. A decade after the New World appeared, Arthur Farwell and Henry Gilbert would take Dvořák's words to heart by looking towards American Indian melodies as source material for works created and harmonized in a European style. For several years they would promote "an American voice" by publishing music under the aegis of the Wa-Wan Press, further laying the foundation for an American style that would find its authentic voice in jazz and the symphonic works of Aaron Copland and others during the 1930s.

As he departed America in 1895 for home, Dvořák published a farewell letter in *Harper's Magazine*. In it, he praised Americans for their musical aptitude and enthusiasm. But he also lamented the absence of governmental support for musical instruction and performance. Sadly, his words ring as accurate today as they did 125 years ago. But the legacy and beauty of the *New World Symphony* still resonate with audiences today as it did then and remains one of the most popular symphonies in the symphonic repertoire.

SATURDAY, APRIL 18 @ 7:30 PM



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