



Gustav Meier
Music Director

61st Season

3rd Subscription Concert
Klein Memorial Auditorium
Saturday, December 2, 2006
8:00 p.m.

Benjamin Loeb,
Guest Conductor and Pianist

TCHAIKOVSKY Swan Lake (excerpts)
Scene
Dance of the Swans
Odette and the Prince
Hungarian Dance; Czardas
Waltz

GERSHWIN Rhapsody in Blue
Benjamin Loeb, Pianist

INTERMISSION

GERSHWIN An American in Paris

ELLINGTON/
(after Tchaikovsky) Nutcracker

STRAYHORN *Overture*
arr. Tysik *Toot Toot Tootie Toot (Dance of the Reed Pipes)*
Dance of the Floreadores (Waltz of the Flowers)
Sugar Rum Cherry (Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy)
Peanut Brittle Brigade (March)

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and the Greater Bridgeport Area Foundation.*

PROGRAM NOTES

Tchaikovsky (Russian) as well as both Gershwin and Ellington (Americans) came from countries peripheral to the hegemony of German music that had prevailed in the West from the 18th century into the 20th. (Now the West itself is becoming peripheral in many ways to the rest of the world!) Tchaikovsky was 22 before the first Conservatory in the country opened in St. Petersburg with Nicolai Rubinstein as its head and formal music training became available to him. He had had contact with groups such as the Russian Musical Society who were making available performances of European classics and also encouraging development of a native style. With Tchaikovsky's appointment to the faculty of the also new Moscow Conservatory which had Nicolai's brother, Anton Rubinstein, as head, he gave up any thought of pursuing the career of civil servant for which he had trained.

Gershwin also grew up in a major city with only the beginnings of formal institutions for music study (the Institute of Musical Art, precursor of Juilliard, was founded in 1905). He had lessons for two or three years from an "extraordinary teacher," Charles Hambitzer, who recognized his potential as a "genius who will make his mark in music if anybody will." Hambitzer gave him a thorough grounding in classics and at 14 he left the High School of Commerce to become a song plugger on Tin Pan Alley, 28th street between Broadway and 5th Avenue. When business was slow, he played Bach Preludes and Fugues, saying I'm studying to be a great song writer."

For Ellington, there was even less formality. The poolroom and any cabaret where the piano was being played were sufficient. There were "schooled musicians who had been to the conservatory, but I listened to the unschooled too. There was a fusion, a borrowing of ideas and they helped one another right in front of where I was listening. Doc Perry was my piano parent and Henry Grant invited me to his house to study harmony. I could also hear people whistling and I got all the Negro music that way. You can't

learn that in any school. I had to ask a lot of questions. I was always lucky enough to run into people who had the answers. How does one pay off this type of indebtedness?" (Ellington: "Music is my Mistress.")

Tchaikovsky was closest of the three to European models and spent much working time in Italy, France and elsewhere (he came to New York to conduct the inaugural concerts at Carnegie Hall in 1891). He ended by writing symphonies, concertos, ballets and chamber works, among others, that communicate directly and are often the first works that a new listener of classical music will respond to. Their Russian hyperbole is tempered by a cosmopolitan frame.

Gershwin began as a song writer in a "jazz" style, of which idiom he said in 1933, "I regard (it) as an American folk music; not the only one, but a very powerful one. When I wrote the Rhapsody in Blue", he went on, "I took 'Blues' and put them in a larger and more serious form... if I had taken the same themes and put them in songs they would have been gone years ago." This upwardly mobile path required him to learn orchestration and study composition in a more systematic way, which he did for four years beginning in 1932 under Joseph Schillinger, a transplanted Russian composer," during which he wrote the opera "Porgy and Bess".

Duke Ellington stayed a jazz musician his whole career (he had as many as 5 dance bands working for hire in the Washington D. C. area by the time he was 20). While he wrote many hit songs himself or in collaboration with members of his band, he also composed extended works, usually in Suite form, 50 film scores, several musicals and an opera. His output comprises about 6000 works and defies category.

SWAN LAKE (excerpts)

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893)

With Swan Lake, Tchaikovsky took the "genre of Russian Ballet to new heights" imbuing it with a substance that demanded more of the orchestra and dancers "than a

series of numbers designed to flatter their technique” (Warrack). For Tchaikovsky ballet might be “divorced from reality” (which a symphony was not). The scenario of Swan Lake involves an evil magician who transforms maidens into swans and is duplicitous. Conflicts are resolved, but along the way there is room for Tchaikovsky’s “bitter belief that love was to be found only against the direst opposition and might even then be denied realization.” The excerpts played tonight have this great theme of stern romantic ardor and also several of the graceful, entertaining divertissements.

RHAPSODY IN BLUE

George Gershwin (1898 - 1937)

Paul Whiteman’s February 12th, 1924 concert in New York was billed as “purely educational.” A panel of classical experts were to decide which of the compositions performed were the most American, the intention being “to point out the tremendous strides which have been made in popular music since the day, ten years ago, when jazz sprang up from nowhere in particular.”

“In the Rhapsody”, Gershwin said, “I tried to express our manner of living, the tempo of our modern life with its speed and chaos and vitality.” The nervous, overwrought, but exhilarating, ambience of a big city was his natural milieu, and he claimed that the rhythm of the opening sections had been inspired by the rattle of train wheels as he rode to Boston for tryouts of his latest Broadway show. The Rhapsody in Blue, which he wrote in three weeks, took its first audience by storm and propelled Gershwin “across the tracks” from the popular to the classical side.

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS

George Gershwin

When music critic Carl van Vechten heard Rhapsody in Blue he called it “the very finest piece of serious music to come out of America” and wrote the composer “go straight on and you will knock all Europe silly.” Something of the kind happened when George, his sister, his brother Ira and Ira’s wife went to Paris for the second time in 1928. There were parties, an Elsa Maxwell reception, meetings

with musicians the likes of Ravel, Stravinsky, Prokofieff and etc. George already had sketches with him for An American in Paris and worked on it there. “I’ve not endeavored to present any definite scenes in this music,” he wrote and then proceeded to give some. “My purpose here is to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to various street noises (including taxi horns) and absorbs the French atmosphere....a rich ‘blues’ with a strong rhythmic undercurrent follows. Our American friend,...perhaps after a few drinks, has suddenly succumbed to a spasm of homesickness....the spirit of the music returns to the bubbling exuberance of the opening part. Apparently the homesick American, having left the café, has downed his spell of blues. At the conclusion the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant.”

NUTCRACKER SUITE

Duke Ellington (1899 -1974)/

Billy Strayhorn (1915 - 1967)

arr. Tysik

In “The Nutcracker”, performed all over the United States as part of holiday celebrations, a young girl’s Christmas eve dream becomes real as her present of a nutcracker turns into a Prince who leads her to a magic kingdom where she is entertained by all the other toys who have come alive too. “In a world starved of sweetness there will never fail to be a craving for the music of the Kingdom of the Sweets.” (John Warrack; “Tchaikovsky”). Ellington applied his style of swing and improvisation in 1961 to this Suite of nine pieces from the ballet, five of which are played this evening. Of his collaborator, Billy Strayhorn, he wrote “he was my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brain waves in his head, and his in mine.” Of composer Tchaikovsky, he said “that cat was it.”

Originally written for the sound of saxophones, trumpets and trombones with drums, bass and piano that characterized Ellington’s Big Band, Jeff Tysik made this faithful arrangement for full symphony.

-Burton Hatheway