



FIRSTS & FANTASIES | PROGRAM NOTES

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Gunther Schuller

A Dramatic Overture

An overture announces to an audience that a play or opera is about to begin, and introduces themes or characters that will soon take their place upon the stage. This musical form was an appropriate choice for the compositional debut of the young Gunther Schuller, who was embarking on a career as a composer that has continued for more than sixty years.

By his mid-twenties, Schuller had already been a professional French horn player for ten years, performing with American Ballet Theatre and the Metropolitan Opera, among other ensembles. In 1949–50 he participated in jazz recordings with Miles Davis. These musical experiences can be heard in the rhythms and harmonies of this early composition, and indeed Schuller went on to emphasize the connections between different types of music—classical, jazz, ragtime, and more—throughout his decades as a composer, conductor, and educator. In a 1988 interview with Bruce Duffie for WNIB radio, he stated: “The tradition that preceded us—including, in my case, a deep involvement with the whole jazz tradition—comes out in my music, sometimes overtly or consciously, sometimes subliminally. All of those things are then combined together as a kind of intellectual and emotional reaction to, and reflection of, my life and my times as I see them.”

But first he had to announce himself as a composer. He tells an amusing story of how the *Dramatic Overture* came to be recorded. Léon Barzin, then conductor of the National Orchestral Association, agreed to record the work if the composer could come up with the performers. For several days, Schuller stood outside the Carnegie Hall stage door, buttonholing his fellow musicians and asking them to participate in a recording session at the old City Center. He was successful in persuading them, and the recording of the overture attracted the attention of Dmitri Mitropoulos, who went on to program it at the New York Philharmonic, launching the young composer’s career.

David Rakowski

Zephyrs

I’ve enjoyed the few opportunities I’ve had to work with dancers, and I fantasize about one day writing a full-length ballet—probably funded by popcorn sales during intermission. Given the opportunity to write for this wonderful orchestra, I chose to try my hand at writing something a little lighter than is usual for me, and based on the movement of dancers; I told Dick Pittman I’d

write two or three short “dance episodes” for this season, lasting ten minutes or so. The first thing I wrote was *Zephyrs*, loosely based on gestures representing light breezes that start and stop mercurially—especially the quick scales in the woodwinds, and chords that expand outward in the strings from the central E that is present for the whole piece. *Zephyrs* was so much fun to write that it somehow ballooned to eight minutes, and when I was finished, I had ideas for yet more pieces for dance—and so over the summer, *Dance Episodes*, the light dancy concert opener, expanded into Symphony no. 5, clocking in at 24 minutes. The premiere of the complete piece will be on the orchestra’s October 25, 2014, concert. Tonight we hear *Zephyrs* by itself.

—David Rakowski

Roy Harris

Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra

Roy Harris was an American original. The son of Oklahoma farmers, he found his way to the center of American musical life in the middle of the twentieth century through talent, dedication, and the support of prominent figures such as Aaron Copland, Howard Hanson, and Serge Koussevitzky. His music often took inspiration from folk tunes or national heroes, combined in original ways with asymmetrical rhythms and rich harmonies.

The Fantasy for Piano is rooted in three folk songs, assigned to the strings, winds, and solo piano. These themes weave together into a work both meditative and exuberant. It was written for Harris’s wife, a former child prodigy who became a distinguished soloist and teacher as well as a Hollywood studio musician. When they married, he persuaded her to change her given name, Beula, to Johana in honor of Johann Sebastian Bach. Roy and Johana went on to collaborate as professors at leading music schools, concert and festival organizers, and ambassadors for American music abroad.

Sergei Prokofiev

Symphony no. 7

Prokofiev’s seventh and final symphony, composed between December 1951 and July 1952, is fairly traditional in design. Its first movement, cast in sonata form, starts with a somber first theme, in C-sharp minor, in the violins. The second theme, expansive and optimistic in character, in F major, is introduced by the cellos, basses, and low winds, with an undulating accompaniment in the violins. A solo oboe starts the closing theme, in a haunting dialogue with delicate accompanying figures, before the celli and basses begin the development section featuring the themes in various guises. The recapitulation returns us to the opening C-sharp minor theme (though still developing), with the oboes and violins starting the increasingly expansive second theme in D-flat major. The closing section reviews its own memorable theme in staccato high notes, with the help of xylophone, glockenspiel, and piano.

The second movement, an Allegretto waltz in F major, provides a lyrical and playful contrast to the first movement, though with some autumnal moments that may suggest the influence of Mahler. The third movement, marked Andante espressivo, provides a slow and lyrical further contrast,

employing material from the composer's own earlier setting of *Eugene Onegin* (1936), connoting the heroine Tatyana and her feelings for Onegin.

The fourth movement finale, beginning *Vivace* in D-flat major, starts off as a playful “galop” with harp glissandi, back-and-forth bantering among sections of the orchestra, jocular melodies, and rapid modulations catching the listener off guard. Later, its tempo slackens, presenting a mock march with dotted rhythm, then a lively variation of the opening section's materials—and a surprise return of the expansive second theme of the first movement, still in our home key. The coda provides Prokofiev's masterstroke: the final return of the closing theme of the first movement, with added brass choir and most affecting harmonic changes.

What we hear in this work is surely influenced by what we know of its Soviet context under the shadow of Stalin, whose death date was Prokofiev's as well, March 5th, 1953. Did our composer of *Peter and the Wolf* simply write another children's (morally edifying) entertainment in the present symphony? He did initially call it a “Children's Symphony,” but, according to Rostropovich, changed the title because of the music's appeal to adults. Samuel Samosud, who conducted the October 11, 1952, premiere with the State Radio Orchestra, suggested that the composer append a happy and optimistic ending in order to gain the rewards of the Stalin Prize; that ending can still be found in the score, as it was performed that November 6th with Prokofiev's reluctant assent. As fate had it, the Stalin Prize was no longer awarded after Stalin's death, but this symphony did posthumously receive the Lenin Prize in 1957. Tonight's performance ends this work with the original closing theme, as Prokofiev affirmed as his own preference. Does it represent the final ticking away of time, near the end of his life?

—Raymond H. Rosenstock

ABOUT THE COMPOSERS

Gunther Schuller, NEP Composer Laureate

Gunther Schuller's professional music career began as a horn player, performing with the American Ballet Theater, as principal horn in the Cincinnati Symphony (1943-1945) and with the Metropolitan Opera from 1945-1959. Schuller's jazz career also began as a French horn player on Miles Davis's *Birth of the Cool* recording (1949-1950). As an educator, Schuller first taught at the Manhattan School of Music from 1950-1953. From 1964-1967 Schuller held the position of Professor of Composition at Yale University. At the request of Aaron Copland, Schuller began teaching at the Berkshire Music Center (at Tanglewood) in 1963 and subsequently served as its Artistic Director from 1969-1984.

From 1967-1977, Schuller served as President of the New England Conservatory where he formalized NEC's commitment to jazz by establishing the first degree-granting **jazz program** at a major classical conservatory in 1969. Shortly thereafter, he instituted the Third Stream department

(subsequently named the Contemporary Improvisation department) to explore the regions where the two musical “streams” of classical and jazz meet and mingle (Schuller had coined the term “Third Stream” during a lecture he gave at Brandeis University in 1957). He hired the iconic Ran Blake to be the department’s chair. Early jazz hires included the legendary Jaki Byard and George Russell.

Schuller has composed over 180 works, spanning all musical genres including solo works, orchestral works, chamber music, opera, and jazz. Among Schuller’s orchestral works are Symphony (1965), Seven Studies of Paul Klee (1959), An Arc Ascending (1996), Four Soundscapes, and Shapes and Designs. Schuller’s large scale work Of Reminiscences and Reflections was composed as a tribute to his wife of forty-nine years, Marjorie Black. Schuller has composed two operas: The Visitation (1966), based on a Kafka story; and the children’s opera The Fisherman and his Wife with text by John Updike, derived from the Grimm fairy tale. Notable among Schuller’s works in the chamber music genre are the String Quartet No. 3 (1986), String Quartet No. 4 (2002) and Symbiosis (1957), a piece for violin, piano, and percussion performed in conjunction with a dancer. Schuller’s original jazz compositions occupy an important place in his overall oeuvre. Many of these works epitomize the Third Stream style. These include Transformation for jazz ensemble (1957), Concertino for jazz quartet and orchestra (1959), Variants on a Theme of Thelonious Monk (1960), Teardrop, and Jumpin’ in the Future.

David Rakowski, NEP Composer-in-Residence

David Rakowski grew up in St. Albans, Vermont and studied at New England Conservatory, Princeton, and Tanglewood, where his teachers were Robert Ceely, John Heiss, Milton Babbitt, Paul Lansky, and Luciano Berio. He has received a large number of awards and fellowships, including the Elise L. Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Rome Prize, and he has twice been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music (for pieces commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and the US Marine Band).

He has composed seven concertos, five symphonies, 100 piano etudes, 31 piano preludes, 5 song cycles, and a large amount of wind ensemble music, chamber music, and vocal music for various combinations, as well as music for children. His music has been commissioned, recorded, and performed widely and is published by C.F. Peters. He is the Walter W. Naumburg Professor of Composition at Brandeis University, having also taught at New England Conservatory, Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford.

Roy Harris

Born near Chandler, Oklahoma on February 12, 1898, Roy Harris was a major creative force in the development of an indigenous American style of symphonic composition. His works, which number over 200 in a variety of genres and media, are characterized by broad, often powerfully emotional musical gestures. In his Symphony No. 3 and *Folksong Symphony*, an expansive orchestral palette and colorful manipulation of diverse folksongs limns a loving portrait of the landscape and culture of the great American West.

Studies at the University of California were followed by sessions with Arthur Farwell who introduced him to the poetry of Walt Whitman and encouraged the development of a personal style. Harris also studied with Charles Demarest, Fannie Dillon, Henry Schoenfeld, Modest Altschuler, and, with Copland's encouragement, Nadia Boulanger, under whose tutelage he wrote a Concerto for piano, clarinet, and string quartet establishing him, in Paris, as one of the premier young American composers.

Among Harris's many honors were the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Medal, a Naumburg Award for his Symphony No. 7, election to the American Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters, and the title of Composer Laureate of the State of California. Teaching posts included those at Princeton, Cornell, Peabody College for Teachers, Indiana University, and UCLA.

Sergei Prokofiev

Sergei Prokofiev was born in Sontzovka, near Ekaterinoslav, on April 23, 1891 and received his first musical training from his pianist mother. His first composition was written at the age of seven, and for a while he studied privately with Reinhold Glière before entering the St Peterburg Conservatoire at the age of thirteen. He was outstanding both as a pianist and as a composer, and he graduated from the Conservatoire in 1914 excelling in both capacities.

That same year Prokofiev travelled to London, where Russian music was very fashionable: Chaliapin and Diaghilev were both active, but initial attempts to persuade Diaghilev to mount Prokofiev's opera *The Gambler* were unsuccessful. Prokofiev returned to Russia and works from this period include the perennially popular Classical Symphony, Prokofiev's First, and Violin Concerto No.1 – his mature style would come quickly.

The turmoil of the Revolution drove him from Russia and early in 1918 he made his way to America; where he would remain for 17 years. In the early 1920s he established himself in Paris, composing between international tours as a pianist. The works that emerged – the operas *The Love of Three Oranges* (1919) and *The Fiery Angel* (1919–27), the Second, Third and Fourth Symphonies (1924–25, 1928, 1929–30), the ballets *Pas d'Acier* (1925–26) and *The Prodigal Son* (1928–29) – showed that his style could embrace an enormous range of expression: from a childlike lyricism via fantastic whimsy and motoric rhythms to angular expressionism – and Prokofiev was always an entirely natural melodist. In spite of a hugely successful visit to the Soviet Union in 1927, coinciding with a well-received production of *The Love of Three Oranges*, Prokofiev returned to the West once more, to

his usual round of concert tours and composing, writing and playing the last of his cycle of five piano concertos.

In 1936 Prokofieff took the fateful decision to return to the Soviet Union – ‘like a chicken to the soup’, in the words of Dmitri Shostakovich. With his initial sympathy for the goals of Soviet society, he felt that the composer should offer something directly relevant to the people, and he cast around for suitably Soviet subjects. Although his massive Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution was rejected by a committee of Soviet censors, Prokofiev enjoyed considerable success as a composer of film scores.

Some of his best-known music first appeared on the big screen: *Lieutenant Kijé* (1934) and the cantata *Alexander Nevsky* (1938–39), refashioned from his score for Eisenstein’s epic. For a few years he found renewed favor – with a 1940 staging of his now-classic ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, completed four years earlier – but in February 1948 his career came to a crashing halt when the ‘Zhdanovshchina’ that heralded a tightening of state control over cultural affairs condemned him, Shostakovich and several others as ‘formalists’. He would die just a few years later from complications from a head injury he suffered.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Richard Pittman, Music Director

Richard Pittman has been the Music Director of New England Philharmonic since 1997. During that time, the orchestra has won multiple ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming.

Maestro Pittman is also the Music Director and Founder of Boston Musica Viva and the Music Director of the Concord Orchestra (MA).

Pittman is a frequent guest conductor of the BBC, having conducted each BBC Symphony at least twice (London, Manchester, Glasgow and Cardiff). He has also conducted the BBC Singers and the BBC Concert Orchestra in London. Some of his other engagements include the Kirov Opera Orchestra in St. Petersburg, the Royal Philharmonic London, the National Symphony in Washington, DC, the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, the Hamburg Symphony, the London Sinfonietta, the City of London Sinfonia, the Ulster Orchestra in Belfast, the Concerto Soloists of Philadelphia, the Virginia Philharmonic and the Ensemble Modern in Frankfurt. Pittman has conducted for the Erick Hawkins Dance Company in New York as well as the Dutch Ballet Orchestra in Amsterdam for the Dutch National Ballet.

More recently, Pittman has guest-conducted the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland in Dublin. Other recent engagements include the Seattle Symphony, the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto and several concert series as Assistant Conductor with the New York Philharmonic. Pittman received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from the Peabody Conservatory in 1996. He studied conducting with Laszlo Halasz in New York, Sergiu Celibidache in Italy, Pierre Boulez in Switzerland and Wilhelm Brueckner-Rueggeberg in Germany. He has made 28 recordings with Boston Musica Viva and the City of London Sinfonia for Nonesuch, Delos, Newport Classic, CRI, Neuma, Albany and Columbia Nippon.

Stephen Drury, Pianist

Stephen Drury has given performances throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Latin America, soloing with orchestras from San Diego to Bucharest. A prize winner in several competitions, including the Concert Artists Guild, Affiliate Artists, and Carnegie Hall/Rockefeller competitions, his repertoire stretches from Bach, Mozart, and Liszt to the music of today. A champion of 20th-century music, Drury's critically acclaimed performances range from the piano sonatas of Charles Ives to works by John Cage and György Ligeti.

He premiered the solo part of John Cage's *101* with the BSO and gave the first performance of John Zorn's concerto for piano and orchestra *Aporias* with Dennis Russell Davies and the Cologne Radio Symphony. He has commissioned new works from Cage, Zorn, Terry Riley, Lee Hyla, and Chinary Ung. Drury has given masterclasses at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, Oberlin Conservatory, Mannes Beethoven Institute and throughout the world, and served on juries for the Concert Artist Guild and Orléans Concours International de Piano XXème Siècle Competitions. His recordings include music by Beethoven, Liszt, Stockhausen, Ravel, Stravinsky, Charles Ives, Elliott Carter, Frederic Rzewski, John Cage, Colin McPhee, and John Zorn. Drury created and directs NEC's Summer Institute for Contemporary Piano Performance, and assumed directorship of NEC's Enchanted Circle concert series in 1997.