

## *Rhapsody in Blue & The Firebird*

### ONE-MINUTE NOTES

#### **Milhaud: *La création du monde***

No, not the Book of Genesis. Milhaud's *The Creation of the World* is rooted in African legend. Beginning with animals and vegetables, it proceeds to a very provocative scene between Man and Woman. Brazilian and jazz rhythms pepper the score.

#### **Gershwin: *Rhapsody in Blue***

Gershwin gave the best description of *Rhapsody in Blue*: "I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness." From the slinky clarinet slide at the start to the lavish romantic "big tune" to the frenetic finale, you'll love every minute.

#### **Florence Price: Piano Concerto**

Florence Price's Piano Concerto pulls the Romantic concerto into the African-American musical tradition. She opens with a solo cadenza, travels through blues and spirituals, and concludes in the popular language of early 20th-century dance. Her artistic vision shines through in this powerful music.

#### **Stravinsky: Suite from *The Firebird* (1919)**

A handsome prince, a captive princess, an evil ogre and a good fairy are the main characters in Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird*. His orchestral suite is a capsule version, presenting all the main characters. We can follow the outlines of the scenario through the music, which incorporates some Russian folk tunes.

## **MILHAUD: *La création du monde (The Creation of the World)***

### **DARIUS MILHAUD**

**Born:** September 4, 1892, in Marseille, France

**Died:** June 22, 1974, in Geneva, Switzerland

**Composed:** 1922–23

**World Premiere:** October 25, 1923, in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées

**NJSO Premiere:** 2001–02 season. Maximiano Valdes conducted.

**Duration:** 16 minutes

Throughout his prolific career, Darius Milhaud displayed a strong affinity for extra-musical influences, particularly in the realms of literature and painting. During the early stage of his career, he refined characteristics of a style that was to stamp his compositions for the balance of his long life. Milhaud is best known for two early ballets: *Le boeuf sur le toit (The Ox on the Roof, 1919)* and *La création du monde (The Creation of the World, 1923)*. Both have music with pungent dashes of polytonality, jazz, Brazilian rhythms and an unmistakable French irony.

Milhaud was born in the south of France into a wealthy Jewish family. He began his musical training as a violinist, but rapidly switched to composition. At age 17, he was admitted to the Paris Conservatory, where his teachers included the cream of the French school: Gédalge, Widor, d'Indy and Dukas. He was a standout student, earning prizes in violin, counterpoint and composition, as well as developing friendships with Erik Satie, Jean Cocteau and Paul Claudel.

Claudel's appointment as French minister to Brazil in 1917 led Milhaud to join his friend's entourage to South America for the last 20 months of the war. Milhaud spent 20 months in Brazil in 1917 and 1918, and was entranced by Rio de Janeiro and the exotic instruments and rhythms of Brazilian musical culture. They left a strong imprint on his music. A trip to the United States in 1922 exposed him to jazz and African-American spirituals. Milhaud was drawn to the soulfulness of this country's black music

heritage and made several trips to Harlem to hear live jazz in one of its prime milieus. His biographer Paul Collaer (coincidentally, one of the dedicatees of *La création du monde*), has compared Stravinsky's and Milhaud's respective adaptations of American jazz in their music: "Stravinsky concentrated on the rhythmic possibilities of the music, whereas Milhaud was attracted more to its 'inner voice,' especially the expressive potential of its instrumentation, in particular the eloquent use of percussion."

Milhaud freely acknowledged his debt to jazz in *La création du monde*. In his 1949 autobiography, *Notes Without Music*, he wrote: "At last in *La création*, I had the opportunity I had been waiting for to use those elements of jazz to which I had devoted so much study. I adopted the same orchestra used in Harlem, 17 solo instruments, and I made wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling."

Milhaud was fortunate in securing a collaborative team equal to his talent and inspiration for the ballet's 1923 premiere. The eminent painter Fernand Léger designed the costumes and sets; Jean Börlin choreographed. For the scenario, Milhaud turned to Blaise Cendrars, who drew his themes from African folk tales rather than the Biblical concept of creation.

The storyline introduces a colorful variety of animal and vegetable life, then presents Man and Woman in sequential dances of awareness, desire, consummation and fulfillment. The script closes with these lines:

*The couple is joined.*

*The dance subsides, is slowed and restrained, everything grows calm.*

*Group by group, the dancers disperse, and the couple, locked in an embrace, drifts offstage as if borne by a wave. It is spring.*

The music has a raw emotional appeal. Milhaud provides prominent roles to saxophone, clarinet and percussion. A clarinet solo is the centerpiece of the human couple's dance of desire. Sophisticated rhythmic energy, enhanced by brilliant percussion, drives Milhaud's music. Sometimes it is an undercurrent, other times the energy bursts forth unfettered. Always, the surging life force generating

the spring season is under Milhaud's perfect control.

*Instrumentation: two flutes, oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, horn, two trumpets, trombone, alto saxophone, timpani, tambourine, cowbell, wood blocks, cymbals, snare drum, tenor drum, bass drum, Provençal tambourine, bass drum with cymbal, piano, two violins, cello and bass.*

## **GERSHWIN: *Rhapsody in Blue***

### **GEORGE GERSHWIN**

**Born:** September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

**Died:** July 11, 1937, in Beverly Hills, California

**Composed:** January 7–February 4, 1924

**World Premiere:** February 12, 1924, in New York City

**NJSO Premiere:** 1967–68 season. Elma Adams was the soloist; Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

**Duration:** 16 minutes

In January 1924, the *New York Tribune* announced a concert of American music, at which a committee of judges would decide what American music *was*. For the occasion, Irving Berlin, Victor Herbert and George Gershwin would introduce new compositions. The paper reported: "George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto, Irving Berlin is writing a syncopated tone poem, and Victor Herbert is working on an American Suite."

It was news to Gershwin. He had planned a collaboration with jazz band leader Paul Whiteman, but they hadn't discussed details.

Gershwin was 25, ambitious and talented. Though unschooled, he had solid commercial instincts. Recognizing the professional potential of the American music event, he and Whiteman decided to make the new piece happen. The result was *Rhapsody in Blue*, which has become an iconic American work.

The work has had an extraordinary impact on American music. Although some critics objected to Gershwin's lack of traditional formal discipline, the audience loved the piece. Even the harshest detractors acknowledged the freshness of the musical ideas, beginning with the fabulous clarinet glissando that soars upward at the start, setting the whole sultry tone of the work.

Gershwin later told his first biographer, Isaac Goldberg: "I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness."

That description helps to explain the capriciousness and vivid snapshots in the *Rhapsody*. Its two large sections are peppered with improvisatory solo piano cadenzas. Rhythmic ideas dominate the first half, with extensive, non-traditional development. The E-major section with the *Rhapsody's* most famous melody is the emotional heart of the work, but gives way to a showy and virtuosic close.

*Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs plus bass clarinet, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, timpani, percussion, strings and solo piano.*

## **PRICE: Piano Concerto in D Minor in One Movement (NJSO Premiere)**

### **FLORENCE BEATRICE PRICE**

**Born:** April 9, 1887, in Little Rock, Arkansas

**Died:** June 3, 1953, in Chicago, Illinois

**Composed:** 1933

**World Premiere:** June 24, 1934, in Chicago. Price was the soloist.

**NJSO Premiere:** These are the NJSO premiere performances.

**Reconstructed by Trevor Weston** (b. March 19, 1967, in Brooklyn, New York)

**Premiere of Weston reconstruction:** February 17, 2018, in Chicago.

**Duration:** 23 minutes

The first African-American female composer to have a symphony performed by a major American orchestra, Florence Price and her neglected compositions are being rediscovered.

Her story is remarkable. She performed in public at age 4 and published her first composition when she was 11. She was accepted to New England Conservatory at 16, studying composition, piano and organ. She settled in Chicago and was winning awards by the 1920s. In 1932, she earned first prize in the Wanamaker competition for her Symphony in E Minor. Chicago Symphony conductor Frederick Stock took note and premiered that work in 1933. He also encouraged her to write a piano concerto.

Unfortunately, Price's original orchestration for the concerto did not survive—but two reduced scores did, along with her indications for instrumentation. Drew University composer Trevor Weston based his reconstruction on those manuscripts. "My name came up as someone who could put Humpty Dumpty back together again," he says, smiling.

Price's style is neo-romantic, with models rooted in European Western classics. For example, her orchestral introduction leads to a dramatic extended piano cadenza—a bow to Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto. Later in the first section, the figuration is reminiscent of both Schumann and Rachmaninoff. But African-American elements play a role too, notably in call-and-response textures.

Although the concerto is nominally in one movement, it divides into three sections organized fast-slow-fast. An oboe trill heralds the lyrical slow movement, which opens with music that is half chorale, half spiritual. Blue notes surface here and there, a subtle reference to African-American culture and the flourishing jazz world in 1930s America. Her finale is derived from *Juba*, an African-American dance style thought to have originated in Congo. To modern ears, it sounds like a cross between ragtime and cakewalk. Irresistibly foot-tapping, it will captivate you.

*Instrumentation: Woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, percussion, strings and solo piano.*

## JIGSAW PUZZLE FOR A MODERN COMPOSER

When Mozart died in December 1791, his *Requiem* was unfinished. His widow, Constanze, knew that she could not collect the commission due her late husband until the completed work had been given to the mysterious stranger who had requested the work. She asked several Viennese musicians to take on the project and eventually settled on Mozart's former student Franz Xaver Süssmayr. Süssmayr reconstructed the complete work, fleshing out Mozart's sketches and vocal lines, and adding the orchestral complement where Mozart had not written it out. Though several modern Mozart scholars and performers have crafted other completions, the Süssmayr version of Mozart's *Requiem* is the one most frequently performed today.

Trevor Weston faced an analogous challenge when, in 2010, the Center for Black Music Research commissioned him to reconstruct the full score to Florence Price's Piano Concerto. Price had performed the concerto in 1934, but by the early 1940s the full score and parts had disappeared. Weston worked with two short scores—"music speak" for reductions for one or more pianos. The Price short scores were, respectively, for two pianos and three (!) pianos. Fortunately, her markings in these scores indicated her intentions with respect to instrumentation.

Nevertheless, the task was a delicate one. Weston is himself a composer, and the project required him to suppress his own creative voice and put himself in Price's shoes, so to speak. The trick was to remain true to her style, which fused European classical idioms with folk music, the African-American heritage of spirituals and big-band jazz touches such as call and response.

According to Rae Linda Brown, Florence Price's biographer, "Trevor's name surfaced early on as someone who understands the history of American music, because you have to be able to understand what a symphony orchestra would sound like in 1934." To enhance his understanding, Weston studied Price's existing symphonic scores, as well as the short scores to the concerto, and listened to the few available recordings of her music.

"I started work by playing through the concerto at the piano, mostly the solo part," he recalls. "My

first response was a feeling that I was starting in a Brahmsian/American expressionist concerto, and ending with an R. Nathaniel Dett/Charles Ives/Carl Stalling upbeat American piece!”

Detail by detail, instrument by instrument, section by section, he pieced together what he thought Price would have done. “It was like reconstructing a recipe,” Weston says. The result is a thoroughly convincing concerto, in one movement with three discrete sections, spanning a dizzying variety of styles.

Weston is no novice. He studied music and history at Tufts, then earned both master’s and doctoral degrees at the University of California–Berkeley in composition. Though he was born in Brooklyn, he grew up in New Jersey, graduating from Newark Academy before matriculating at Tufts. “My family moved to Plainfield in 1968,” he says. “My mother and brother still live in the same house in Plainfield! My sister still lives in Kendall Park, and I lived in Madison from 2009 to 2012. It was my first residence after I began teaching at Drew University.” Prior to the Drew appointment, Weston taught at Wabash College in Indiana and, for nine years, at the College of Charleston. He is now a professor of music at Drew and chairs its music department.

Weston has held residencies at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and the MacDowell Colony and a Goddard Lieberon Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In recent years, he has written *Flying Fish* for the American Composers Orchestra (a Carnegie Hall co-commission), *Griot Legacies* for the Boston Landmarks Orchestra and *Truth Tones* for the Boston Children’s Chorus. In 2016, Julian Wachner and the Choir of Trinity Church Wall Street recorded Weston’s choral music.

Weston has written: “I have always gravitated to music that mesmerizes and entrances its listeners by creating a sense of suspended reality. Music can be a portal to a parallel existence where our experiences, thoughts and ideas are communicated through the more impactful abstract nature of aural stimuli. Music allows us to retreat from the mundane to reflect more profoundly on our existence. My intention is to create music that is transformative regardless of instrumentation or



style.”

His reconstruction of Florence Price’s Piano Concerto admirably achieves these goals, and is a loving salute to an overlooked composer who is—albeit posthumously—starting to get the recognition she deserves.

## **STRAVINSKY: Suite from *The Firebird* (1919 Revised Version)**

### **IGOR STRAVINSKY**

**Born:** June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg, Russia

**Died:** April 6, 1971, in New York, New York

**Composed:** 1909–10

**World Premiere:** June 25, 1910, in Paris

**NJSO Premiere:** 1962–63 season. Kenneth Schermerhorn conducted.

**Duration:** 18 minutes

*The Firebird* is adapted from a Russian fairy tale in which a handsome prince is drawn into an enchanted garden and palace by an exotic bird, who is a sort of good fairy. The prince falls in love with a beautiful captive princess, but he must break the spell of the evil ogre Kashchei (who presides over the palace) before he may claim his bride.

Stravinsky was young when he composed *Firebird*, and he drew heavily on the models of Tchaikovsky’s ballets, which were essentially derived from French principles. He took great care to bind the music closely to the action on stage. If one listens carefully, even the suite follows the chronological events and essential outline of the story.

Remarkably, *Firebird* was Stravinsky’s first ballet, and the first of the trio of ballets that established him as a composer of international stature. The new ballet was an instant success, catapulting Stravinsky to international fame virtually overnight.

## BEHIND THE SCENES: THE FIRST REHEARSALS

Tamara Karsavina, the ballerina who created the title role in the 1910 production of *Firebird*, wrote an article in 1948 recalling the young composer's participation and demeanor as the new ballet went into rehearsal:

Often he came early to the theatre before a rehearsal began, in order to play for me, over and over again, some specially difficult passage. I felt grateful, not only for the help he gave me, but for the manner in which he gave it. For there was no impatience in him with my slow understanding; no condescension of a master of his craft towards the slender equipment of my musical education. It was interesting to watch him at the piano. His body seemed to vibrate with his own rhythm; punctuating staccatos with his head, he made the pattern of his music forcibly clear to me, more so than the counting of bars would have done.

*Firebird's* brilliant and lush orchestration proves how well he had learned from his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov. With his strong reliance upon Russian folk tunes, Stravinsky acknowledged some debt to the music of the "Russian Five" (Mily Balakirev, César Cui, Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Borodin). The *Ronde des princesses* shares the exotic orientalism of Borodin's lyrical *Polovtsian Dances*; Stravinsky's grandiose and triumphant finale is surely related to the "Great Gate of Kiev" from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

In a sense, though, *Firebird* also marked Stravinsky's break with his homeland. Thereafter, he was a citizen of the world, living largely in France and Switzerland, and eventually in the United States. The ballet is at once a traditional work and a turning point, marking both the end of an era and the beginning of a brilliant, lengthy career.

*Firebird* was premiered by the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets russes* in Paris in 1910. The following year, Stravinsky derived a suite from the ballet, concluding with Kashchei's "Infernal Dance." He re-orchestrated the suite in 1919 for a somewhat smaller orchestra, using the finale of the complete ballet for his conclusion; that is the version we hear. For a third version in 1945, he

composed some additional connective music.

*Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbal, triangle, xylophone, harp, celeste, piano and strings.*