

This concert is a celebration on two fronts: the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the fact that the Excelsior Symphony Orchestra has the privilege of performing as part of the opening season of the Hackley School's Diller Hall, Allen Center for the Creative Arts and Technology.

THE PROGRAM

Morton Gould (1913-1996) once said: "Composing is my life blood. That is basically me, and although I have done many things in my life—conducting, arranging, playing piano, and so on—what is fundamental is my being a composer." A child prodigy, he had his first music published at the age of six. There was some subsequent study at the Institute of Musical Art (predecessor of the Juilliard School). But it was during the Depression that he honed his skills, working in New York's vaudeville and movie theaters. When Radio City Music Hall opened in 1932, Gould, then only nineteen, became its staff pianist. Just few years later, he attained national prominence on radio networks such as CBS, showing a special flair for mixing the classical and the popular, including spirituals. This broad appeal is the essential reason for the success of so much that he has written in the way of Broadway scores, film music, music for television, and ballet.

His *American Salute* (1943), based on "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," is a "must" for many patriotic concerts. It was originally done for a radio broadcast, part of a series saluting wartime Allies. Gould recalled: "At six o'clock in the evening before the broadcast I sat down at my desk to get to work on the piece, with copyists standing by. The next morning we had the music on the stands for rehearsal and we broadcast it that evening."

Florence Price (1888-1953) was the first African-American woman to achieve distinction as a composer. In her home town of Little Rock, Ark., she began composing and publishing short pieces while in high school. By 1906, she had graduated with honors from the New England Conservatory of Music. The next few years found her back in Little Rock, teaching at places like Shorter College; it was followed by a stint at Clark University in Atlanta, where she headed the music department. But her marriage in 1912 back in Little Rock turned out to be a mixed blessing. She had three children, one who died in infancy. Opening a music studio, she taught piano and continued to compose, but was not allowed to join the Arkansas State Music Teachers Association because of her race.

Segregation and racial discrimination, not to mention local lynchings, eventually proved too much. In 1927, she and her family joined the Great Migration to Chicago. The Windy City became home for the rest of her life, where her horizons began to expand. Her Symphony in E Minor was performed by the Chicago Symphony of Orchestra in 1933 under

Frederick Stock. It was also performed at the Chicago World's Fair as part of the Century of Progress Exhibition. Actually, a precedent had been set two years earlier with recognition accorded William Grant Still for his *Afro-American Symphony*, which is discussed below.

Florence Price composed some 300 works in her lifetime, including chamber music, vocal compositions and commercials for radio. Her style is a mix of classical European music and African-American spirituals and rhythms, as is the case with her Concert Overture No. 2 from 1943. It is part of a treasure trove discovered only in 2009 by a young couple renovating a dilapidated house in St. Anne, Ill., south of Chicago. Even though vandals had ransacked the property and a fallen tree had torn a hole in the roof, piles of Price manuscripts, books, and papers were found largely intact. The place had been her summer home.

With its hints of Antonin Dvořák and some Claude Debussy, Concert Overture no. 2 is a neo-romantic work, essentially a fantasia inspired by three spirituals, "Go Down Moses," "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit," and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."

Charles Ives (1874-1954) is Danbury, Conn.'s most famous musical son—one whose singular purpose, it seems, was "to stretch our ears and strengthen our musical minds." This was where his father, George Ives, the youngest bandmaster in the Union Army, had a profound influence. As Charles Ives once recalled, "he thought that man as a rule didn't use the faculties that the Creator had given him hard enough ... he would have us sing a tune in E-flat, but play the accompaniment in C ... he made us stick to the end, and not stop when it got hard."

Some time after graduating from Yale, Ives made sober assessment of his prospects as a composer. "Assuming a man lives by himself and with no dependents, he might write music that no one would play, listen to, or buy. But—but if he has a nice wife and some nice children, how can he let the children starve on his dissonances?" So he came to lead a double life, working very successfully in the insurance business by day, and composing in the evening and on weekends. He did, however, eventually receive belated recognition in the late 1940's, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1947 for his Third Symphony. And four years later, Ives found an ardent champion in Leonard Bernstein who conducted his Second Symphony, remarking "We have suddenly discovered our musical Mark Twain, Emerson and Lincoln all rolled into one."

Ives's "Variations on 'America'" originated as piece for solo organ; in February 1892, it was premiered by the teenage composer at the Methodist Church in Brewster, N.Y. The more familiar orchestral version by William Schuman dates from 1963. Quirky and idiosyncratic,

the piece defies convention from the get-go. There is no initial straightforward statement of his source material, “God Save the King.” Rather, in the opening 32 measures there are already changes to the shape and rhythm of the melody, patches of tonal ambiguity, not to mention the interpolation of fresh material. Following a simple statement of the melody, there are nominally five variations, punctuated by two “Interludes” which serve as abridged variations. Included is the zesty fourth polonaise variation in the minor. The work culminates in a rousing coda.

William Eckfeld (1951-2026) was musician of multiple gifts, accomplished as composer, pianist/organist, double bassist and educator. Prior to 1987, when he became Orchestra Director at White Plains High School, he played double bass in the Rochester Philharmonic and then the Dallas Symphony. Since his retirement from the school system in 2013, he served as organist at area churches.

Eckfeld’s association with the Excelsior Symphony and its earlier incarnation, the St. Thomas Orchestra, was deeply enriching. From time to time, he not only led the double bass section or served as conductor; he also premiered with us a number of his original compositions. These include a cello concerto, and such pieces as “Tempest,” “De Profundis,” and “American Overture.” His “Fanfare for Hackley,” completed last year, is a finely crafted work for brass choir incorporating elements from Copland, Hindemith, Sibelius, and other composers.

William Christopher Handy (1873-1958) has been called “Father of the Blues.” It is not so much that he created the blues, but that he had the smarts to form his own publishing company and copyright everything he wrote. His “St. Louis Blues,” published in 1914, became the biggest hit in the annals of jazz discography, with well over 200 different recordings tabulated. We can throw into the mix the Mike Lewis arrangement being played at this concert.

“St. Louis Blues” is actually an anomaly. The first part is made up of two twelve-bar choruses, each sung in the original to single rhymed couplet with the first line repeated—fairly standard—starting with “I hate to see de evenin’ sun go down.” What follows is a 16-measure tango, an echo of something Handy heard in Havana at the turn of the century in the course of a Cuban tour. There is then new material, another twelve-bar blues, containing the “hook” of the song. “Got de St. Louis blues, jes as blue as I can be/Dat man got a heart lak a rock cast in de sea.” Handy has claimed that the second line, in particular, was inspired by a St. Louis woman he ran into on the city streets who was distraught over the cold indifference of her absentee husband.

William Grant Still (1895-1978) has been called “The Dean of Afro-American Composers.” Versatile and prolific, he wrote and arranged music for bandleaders and show people, continuing all the while composing in a style more appropriate for the concert hall. This was a man who could study composition with avant-gardists like Edgard Varese, but also play professionally with dance orchestras, make arrangements for W.C. Handy, and play in the pit orchestra of such Broadway shows as Eubie Black and Noble Sissle’s *Shuffle Along*, a breakthrough work in African-American musical theater. Still’s gifts extended to opera as well. Among his works for the stage is his *A Bayou Legend*. In 1981, PBS presented a nationwide telecast, making history presenting an opera by a black composer for the first time.

But it was 50 years earlier that Still gained major recognition, when, in 1931, Howard Hanson and the Rochester Philharmonic premiered his *Afro-American Symphony*—the first time a major symphony orchestra had played a work by a black composer. It became Still’s most consistently played work for many years. Still himself described the symphony as portraying “the American Negro” not in sorrow alone, but in a full range of emotional expression—joy, humor, spirituality, and hope. In doing so, he created a work that is both deeply rooted in a specific cultural experience and broadly resonant as a cornerstone of American symphonic repertoire.

At the heart of the symphony is the blues, which Still elevates from a vernacular style to a symphonic language. The expressive melodic contours and harmonic inflections of the blues are woven into a traditional four-movement structure. Each movement is prefaced in the score by a poetic epigraph drawn from the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar, reflecting Still’s desire to connect music with broader African American artistic expression.

The first movement, marked *Moderato assai*, introduces the symphony’s central theme: a twelve-bar blues melody first heard in the English horn. This theme recurs throughout the work, serving as a unifying thread. The movement balances classical sonata form with the emotional directness of the blues, moving between lyricism and rhythmic vitality.

The second movement, *Adagio*, offers a deeply expressive and introspective contrast. Here, Still evokes the spiritual tradition, creating a sense of longing and quiet dignity. The orchestration is transparent and sensitive, allowing the melodic lines to sing with a vocal quality reminiscent of hymn and song.

The third movement, *Animato*, functions as a scherzo. It is lively, syncopated, and dance-like, incorporating elements of jazz and vernacular dance rhythms. The music’s playful character and shifting accents bring a sense of spontaneity, while still maintaining structural clarity.

The final movement, Lento, con risoluzione, begins with a somber introduction before building toward a resolute and affirmative conclusion. The blues theme returns transformed, now imbued with strength and optimism. The symphony closes with a sense of triumph, suggesting both personal and cultural resilience.

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