

Program Notes

In terms of American influence, **Claude Debussy** (1862-1918) was especially drawn to the literature of Edgar Allan Poe. In fact, at the time of his death, he left two dark operas unfinished – “Devil in the Belfry” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

In a totally different world, the influence of ragtime, more specifically that of the cakewalk, led him to compose “the Golliwog’s Cakewalk,” the final movement of his delightful “Children’s Corner Suite.” It is also often remembered for its midsection where it skewers Wagner and the Prelude to his opera “Tristan and Isolde.”

The Debussy selection opening this evening’s concert “En bateau,” (“sailing”) is the first of a four-movement work, “Petite Suite,” composed from 1886 to 1889. Originally written for piano four hands, its composition seems to have been prompted by a request from Debussy’s publisher, Jacques Durand, for a piece that would be accessible to the skilled amateur market. The orchestral version being performed this evening dates from 1907 and is the work of Debussy’s colleague Henri Büsser. With its *andantino* tempo marking, it moves to a gentle duple rhythm, evoking the rowing of a boat.

Ferde Grofé (1892-1972) has often been linked with Paul Whiteman and the Feb. 12, 1924 concert, “An Experiment in Modern Music.” An event for the history books, the occasion marked the world premiere of Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” with the composer at the piano. Grofé is credited with transforming at very short notice the original two-piano version into the beloved jazz band and piano masterpiece we know today. He subsequently made a grander symphonic version in 1942.

“Grand Canyon Suite” was completed in 1931 and was premiered that year by Paul Whiteman and his orchestra. It is an iconic work, a landmark in the field of American orchestral tone poems. This evening, ESO performs four of the five movements, except “On the Trail.” What follow are the individual movements together with descriptions provided in the printed score:

SUNRISE

It is early morning on the desert. The sun rises, slowly painting the darkness with the rich colors of dawn. The sun comes from beyond the horizon, announcing the full break of day.

THE PAINTED DESERT

The desert is silent and mysterious, yet beautiful. As the bright rays of the sun are reflected against majestic crags and spread across the sands in varying hues, the entire scene appears as a canvas thick with the pigments of nature’s own blending.

SUNSET

Now the shades of night sweep over the golden hues of the day. As evening envelops the desert in a cloak of darkness, there is a suggestion of animal calls coming from the distant rim of the canyon.

CLOUDBURST

This is the most pictorial movement of the suite. We hear the approach of the storm. Lightning flashes across the sky and thunder roars from the darkness. The torrent of rain reaches its height in a cloudburst, but the storm disappears rapidly and the moon comes from behind the clouds. Nature again rejoices in all its grandeur.

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) first appeared in the U.S. in 1909, giving performances with orchestra in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. In Chicago, he not only appeared as piano soloist, but also conducted the Chicago Symphony. Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, he settled in the U.S in 1918.

His discographic legacy, particularly with orchestra, is represented by the series of recordings he made for RCA Victor with the Philadelphia Orchestra, where he performs all four of his piano concertos as well as “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini.” He also conducted a recording of his tone poem, “Isle of the Dead.”

Piano Concerto No. 2 is one of the most beloved works in the concerto repertoire. At the same time, it is quite unique in the way it came to be written. Following the disastrous premiere of his first symphony in March 1897, Rachmaninoff was plunged into a deep depression, unable to write much of anything. But thanks to the treatment by a Dr. Nikolai Dahl -- a psychiatrist and hypnotherapist who included operatic basso Feodor Chaliapin and composer Alexander Scriabin among his patients -- Rachmaninoff was able to recover and complete this concerto in April 1901. And following a series of triumphant performances in Russia, Germany, and England, the concerto was first performed by him in the U.S. on Nov. 8, 1909 at the Philadelphia Academy of Music.

The opening piano solo is notable for the way it suggests the sounds of church bells before ushering in the deeply sonorous orchestral tutti that attests to Rachmaninoff’s familiarity with Russian Orthodox chant. This opening movement also happens to include a brief *espressivo* phrase for the violas that introduces the soaring lyrical E-flat second theme—a loving tribute to Dr. Dahl, who was an accomplished amateur violist. Even more memorable is the viola-centric melody in the finale that later morphed into the song “Full Moon and Empty Arms.”

Lenoard Bernstein (1918-1990), prodigiously gifted in so many areas, is loved by the larger public primarily for his 1957 Broadway musical “West Side Story.” Transferring the story of

Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" to Manhattan, he has the Sharks and the Jets roughly aligning with the original feuding families of the Montagues and the Capulets. And Romeo and Juliet find their counterparts in Tony and Maria.

Prepared in 1960, the "Symphonic Dances" is a concert suite, the product of an unusual collaboration with Bernstein's childhood friend Sid Ramin and with further assistance from Irwin Kostal. Ramin and Kostal worked under Bernstein's supervision expanding and adapting the theatrical scoring for a large symphony orchestra. The result was a sequence of nine interconnected episodes that follows a musical logic that largely consistent with the dramatic arc of the original. Sharp contrasts abound, with antagonism and rivalry juxtaposed with episodes of intimacy and vulnerability.

The Prologue establishes the antagonism between the gangs in taut, rhythmically charged music; and it opens with the tritone C to F#, a sonic metaphor for the fate awaiting the star-crossed lovers.

"Somewhere" conveys a sense of a visionary space, a dream of reconciliation and peace. Bernstein's creative spark here seems to have been kindled by two crucial measures from the opening to the slow movement of Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto.

"Mambo" is all about the hot competitiveness on the dance floor in the gym.

"Cha-cha," recalling the first dance in the gym of Tony and Maria, is a masterpiece of hesitancy, it incorporates the tritone motif as well as phrases from Maria.

"Meeting Scene" recalls the scene where Tony and Maria engage in straight dialogue, starting with Tony asking "You're not thinking I'm someone else?" and Maria responding "I know you're not." Meanwhile, the music in the background includes the tritone motif and more.

"Cool," a Jet song, once again uses the tritone motif as well as passages of some dense fugal writing. The title is also an allusion to a contemporaneous development in jazz that embraced elements of classical music as well as a style associated with Miles Davis.

"Rumble" includes the most aggressive music in the score, with the tritone motif embedded. It accompanies the showdown between the Jets and the Sharks, both gangs armed with knives.

"I Have a Love" provides a moment of painful reflection. In the original, it features a duet involving Maria and Anita. Maria, the sister of Bernardo, leader of the Sharks, is empathizing with Anita, who is Bernardo's girlfriend. Stephen Sondheim's inspired lyrics tell it all: "When love comes so strong, there is no right or wrong."

"Finale" includes wisps of "Somewhere," and culminates in a flute solo suggesting the fragile hope of a better tomorrow.

Joshua Berrett © 2026

Dr. Joshua Berrett, ESO board member and member of the first violin section, is internationally recognized for his publications in such diverse areas as jazz and the history of the symphony.

He is co-founder with his wife Lynne of the non-profit Ageless Mind Project, Inc.