

Program Notes for Masterworks 1: American Rhythms

Saturday, September 14 & Sunday, September 15

JAMES LOWE, CONDUCTOR • WILLIAM WOLFRAM, PIANO

- Adams – *Short Ride in a Fast Machine*
- Gershwin – *Rhapsody in Blue*
- Gershwin – *I Got Rhythm Variations for Piano and Orchestra*
- Copland – *Symphony No. 3*

John Adams

Short Ride in a Fast Machine

Composer: born February 15, 1947, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Work composed: 1985; composed for the Pittsburgh Symphony to perform at the inaugural concert of the Great Woods Center for the Performing Arts.

World premiere: Michael Tilson Thomas led the Pittsburgh Symphony on June 13, 1986, at Great Woods, in Mansfield, Massachusetts.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 4 clarinets, 3 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, woodblock, triangle, xylophone, crotales, glockenspiel, suspended cymbal, sizzle cymbal, snare drum, pedal bass drum, large bass drum, large tam-tam, tambourine, 2 synthesizers (optional), and strings.

Estimated duration: 4 minutes.

“The image that I had while composing this piece was a ride that I once took in a sports car,” John Adams said in an interview. “A relative of mine had bought a Ferrari, and he asked me late one night to take a ride in it and we went out onto the highway ... it was an absolutely terrifying experience to be in a car driven by somebody who wasn’t really a skilled driver.” Later, looking back on that wild ride, Adams recalled, “I had not yet recovered ... and it was somewhat still on my brain when I began to think about what kind of fanfare I would write [for the Pittsburgh Orchestra]. *Short Ride* is somewhat an evocation of that ... which was both thrilling and also a kind of white-knuckle anxious experience.

“The piece starts with the rhythmic knocking of the woodblock, which creates a rhythmic gauntlet through which the orchestra has to pass,” Adams continued. “We hear typical fanfare figures in the brass but in a rat-a-tat staccato form ... part of the fun of *Short Ride* is making these large instruments — tuba, double basses, contrabassoon, the entire brass section — *move*. They have to boogie through this very resolute and inflexible pulse set up by the woodblock.” Adams acknowledged *Short Ride* is a challenge for any orchestra; it’s “very difficult to play but quite a bit of fun.” Idiosyncratic tempo markings like the opening “delirando” indicate Adams’ concept of a headlong go-for-broke race to the finish.

George Gershwin

Rhapsody in Blue

Composer: born September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York; died July 11, 1937, Hollywood, California

Work composed: Gershwin wrote *Rhapsody in Blue* in the first three weeks of 1924.

World premiere: Gershwin was at the piano when Paul Whiteman's Orchestra premiered *Rhapsody in Blue* premiered at Aeolian Hall in New York on February 12, 1924.

Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, 3 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, gong, glockenspiel, snare drum, celesta, triangle, banjo, and strings.

Estimated duration: 15 minutes.

Rhapsody in Blue occupies a special place in American music: it introduced jazz to classical concert audiences, and simultaneously made an instant star of its composer. From its signature clarinet glissando right through to its brilliant finale, *Rhapsody in Blue* epitomizes the Gershwin sound, and transformed the 25-year-old songwriter from Tin Pan Alley into a composer of “serious” music.

The story of how *Rhapsody in Blue* came about is as captivating as the music itself. On January 4, 1924, Ira Gershwin showed George a news report in the New York Tribune about a concert put together by jazz bandleader Paul Whiteman that would endeavor to trace the history of jazz; Whiteman had given this concert a rather grandiose title, “An Experiment in Modern Music.” The report concluded with a brief announcement: “George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto.” This was certainly news to Gershwin, who was then in rehearsals for the Broadway show *Sweet Little Devil*. Gershwin contacted Whiteman to refute the Tribune article, but Whiteman eventually talked Gershwin into taking the job. Whiteman also sweetened the deal by offering to have Ferde Grofé orchestrate Gershwin's music for orchestra. Gershwin completed *Rhapsody in Blue* in three weeks.

Gershwin's phenomenal talent as a pianist wowed the audience as much as the novelty of jazz stylings in a “classical” piece of music. The original opening clarinet solo, written by Gershwin, got its trademark jazzy glissando from Whiteman's clarinetist Ross Gorman. This opening unleashes a floodgate of colorful ideas that flow seamlessly into one another. The pulsing syncopated rhythms and showy music eventually give way to a warm, expansive melody suggestive of Sergei Rachmaninoff's most romantic themes.

George Gershwin

“I Got Rhythm” Variations for Piano and Orchestra

Composer: born September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York; died July 11, 1937, Hollywood, California.

Work composed: Gershwin completed the Variations on January 6, 1934 for an upcoming concert tour, and dedicated them “to my brother Ira.”

World premiere: Gershwin premiered the Variations with the Leo Reisman Orchestra in Boston’s Symphony Hall on January 14, 1934.

Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 flutes (1 doubling piccolo) 2 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, Chinese gong, drum kit, glockenspiel, ratchet, woodblock, xylophone, and strings.

Estimated duration: 9 minutes.

On October 14, 1930, George and Ira Gershwin’s musical *Girl Crazy* opened at the Alvin Theatre on Broadway, where it played to packed houses for the next eight months. The show’s score includes several of the finest songs in the brothers’ catalog, including “But Not For Me,” “Embraceable You,” and “I Got Rhythm.”

“I Got Rhythm,” with its infectious, buoyant charm, naturally lends itself to improvisation, something at which George excelled. “George loved playing the piano for people and would do so at the slightest provocation,” Rouben Mamoulian, the first director of *Porgy & Bess*, recalled. “... I am sure that most of his friends, in thinking of George at his best, think of him at the piano. I’ve heard many pianists and composers play for informal gatherings, but I know of no one who did it with such genuine delight and verve. George at the piano was George happy ... He could play ‘I Got Rhythm’ for the thousandth time, yet do it with such freshness and exuberance as if he had written it the night before.”

Before Gershwin embarked on a 1934 concert tour to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, he created a composed version of those “thousand” improvisations on “I Got Rhythm.” The result: six variations, which Gershwin characterized as “simple,” “piano chromatic,” “rich,” “Chinese,” “modal,” and “hot,” respectively.

Aaron Copland

Symphony No. 3

Composer: born November 14, 1900, Brooklyn, New York; died December 2, 1990, North Tarrytown, New York.

Work composed: 1944-46. Copland's Third Symphony was commissioned by the Koussevitzky Foundation and Copland dedicated it "to the memory of my good friend, Natalie Koussevitzky."

World premiere: Serge Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony Orchestra on October 18, 1946.

Instrumentation: piccolo, 3 flutes (one doubling 2nd piccolo), 3 oboes (one doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, anvil, bass drum, chimes, claves, cymbals, glockenspiel, ratchet, slapstick, snare drum, suspended cymbal, tam tam, tenor drum, triangle, wood block, xylophone, celeste, piano, 2 harps, and strings.

Estimated duration: 38 minutes.

In 1922, Nadia Boulanger, who taught composition to many of the 20th century's greatest composers, introduced conductor Serge Koussevitzky to one of her young American students. From that moment, Koussevitzky and Aaron Copland forged a reciprocal collaboration that lasted until Koussevitzky's death, in 1951. Koussevitzky championed Copland's music and taught him the nuances of conducting; in turn, Copland encouraged Koussevitzky to focus on American composers, particularly at the Berkshire Music Center (now the Tanglewood Music center), which Koussevitzky established in 1940 in Lenox, MA.

In 1944, Copland received his last commission from Koussevitzky's Foundation; this evolved into his most substantial orchestral work, the Third Symphony. Copland explained, "I knew exactly the kind of music he [Koussevitzky] enjoyed conducting and the sentiments he brought to it, and I knew the sound of his orchestra, so I had every reason to do my darndest to write a symphony in the grand manner."

In his autobiography, Copland wrote, "If I forced myself, I could invent an ideological basis for the Third Symphony. But if I did, I'd be bluffing — or at any rate, adding something *ex post facto*, something that might or might not be true but that played no role at the moment of creation." Nonetheless, one cannot help hearing Copland's Third Symphony as the expression of a country emerging victorious from a devastating war. Copland acknowledged as much, noting that the Third Symphony "intended to reflect the euphoric spirit of the country at the time."

Copland described the *Molto moderato* as "open and expansive." Of particular note is the second theme, a singing melody for violas and oboes, which sounds like an inspirational moment from a film score.

The *Andantino quasi allegretto* contains the most abstract and introspective music in the symphony. High strings wander through an empty landscape, like soldiers stumbling upon a field after a bloody battle. A solo flute intones a melody that binds the rest of the movement together with, as Copland explains, "quiet singing nostalgia, then faster and heavier — almost dance-like; then more childlike and naïve, and finally

more vigorous and forthright.” As the third movement’s various themes weave and coalesce, sounding much like sections of Copland’s ballet music, they produce a half-conscious sense of déjà vu — have we heard this before? Not quite, but almost, and as the third movement dissolves without pause into the final movement, we hear the woodwinds repeating a theme present in all three of the preceding sections. Now the theme shifts, the last jigsaw puzzle piece locks into place, and the *Fanfare for the Common Man* emerges.

Although the *Fanfare* is today Copland’s most recognized music, at the time he was writing the Third Symphony, it was little known. In 1942, Eugene Goossens, music director of the Cincinnati Symphony, commissioned Copland and eighteen other composers to write short, patriotic fanfares, for the orchestra to premiere during their 1942-43 season. Copland explained his choice of title: “It was the common man, after all, who was doing all the dirty work in the war and the army. He deserved a fanfare.”

Copland wanted a heroic finale to represent the Allied victory in WWII, and the *Fanfare* epitomized it. The flutes and clarinets introduce the basic theme, before the brasses and percussion burst forth with the version most familiar to audiences.

Reviews were enthusiastic, ranging from Koussevitzky’s categorical statement that it was the finest American symphony ever written to Leonard Bernstein’s declaration, “The Symphony has become an American monument, like the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial.”