

HARRISBURG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday, May 18, 2019 at 8:00 p.m.

Sunday, May 19, 2019 at 3:00 p.m.

Notes on the Program by DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

Tintagel (1917-1919) Arnold Bax (1883-1953)

Arnold Bax, born on November 8, 1883 into a wealthy family in London that early recognized his musical gifts, was enrolled at the Hampstead Conservatory, then directed by the pioneering folklorist Cecil Sharp, at the age of fifteen, and two years later entered the Royal Academy of Music, where he gained a notable reputation for his ability to read even the most complex scores at sight on the piano. (Bax, independently wealthy, never played or conducted in public.) Late in life he admitted that he had always been “a brazen Romantic,” so it was inevitable that the music of Wagner, Strauss and Elgar made a strong impression upon him during his student years. The most profound effect on Bax at the time, however, was that exercised by the writings of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats. Bax said that Yeats’ *The Wanderings of Usheen*, which he discovered when he was nineteen, “opened the gate of the Celtic wonderland to my wide-eyed youth, and pointed to the magic mountain whence I was to dig all that may be of value in my own art.” Bax once allowed that Yeats’ poetry meant more to him than all the music of the ages. The composer visited Ireland frequently, and even assumed the pseudonym Dermot O’Byrne, under which name he published three books of Irish tales that demonstrated a considerable literary talent. Several of his early orchestral works also show a strong Irish-Celtic influence: *A Connemara Reel*, *Cathaleen-ni-Hoolihan*, *An Irish Overture* and the set of three tone poems called *Eire*.

In 1909, Bax fell in love with a Russian girl and followed her back to her homeland, but in vain. After a few months abroad, he returned to England and married Elsie Luisa Sobrino, the daughter of a Spanish pianist. The failure of the marriage a few years later, the tragedy of World War I, and the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin, for which some of his closest Irish friends were executed, shattered what Bax called the “ivory tower of my youth.” Those difficulties, however, seem to have ignited rather than broken his creative genius, and many of his best works date from the following years: the symphonic poems *The Garden of Fand*, *November Woods* and *Tintagel* were completed between 1916 and 1919; the first of his seven symphonies was finished in 1922. Bax composed steadily in all genres except opera for the next two decades, receiving the Royal Philharmonic Society’s Gold Medal in 1931 and honorary doctorates from Oxford and Durham Universities in 1934 and 1935. He was knighted by George VI in 1937, and four years later, on the death of Walford Davies, he was appointed Master of the King’s Musick. Bax largely abandoned composition after the outbreak of the Second World War (he told those who asked that he supposed he had as much right to retire as any grocer), thereafter writing only two chamber works, a few short orchestral pieces, some choral music, and scores for four films, including David Lean’s 1948 *Oliver Twist*. Bax’s last orchestral work was the 1952 *Coronation March* for Elizabeth II. He spent most of his later years in the village of Storrington in Sussex, but died fittingly, just a month before his seventieth birthday, while vacationing in Ireland.

Bax, an unrepentant Romantic, characterized his music as “the expression of emotional states: I have no interest whatever in sound for its own sake or in any modern ‘isms or factions.” His is a style rich in harmony, melody and texture, epic in scope and polished in craftsmanship. The evocative lure of ancient Celtic legend as a musical inspiration remained strong for him throughout his life, though he turned toward a more abstract compositional idiom in his later years. Edwin Evans summarized Bax’s work as

“the musical equivalent of the lyrical impulse in poetry, the attribute which causes utterance to take spontaneously beautiful forms, irrespective of all else.”

Tintagel is the spectacular site on the northern coast of Cornwall, England’s south-westernmost county, forever associated with King Arthur, his wizard, Merlin, and the misty early history of Great Britain. It has always been a place of mystery and wonder, with the ruined piles of an ancient castle set high above the pounding waves of the north Atlantic. The place worked a special magic on Bax, immersed as he was in Celtic history and legend, and the symphonic poem that it inspired from him in 1917 is one of his finest and best-known compositions. As preface to the published score of *Tintagel*, Bax provided the following précis of the music:

“The work is intended to evoke a tone picture of the castle-crowned cliff of Tintagel and more particularly the wide distances of the Atlantic as seen from the cliffs of Cornwall on a sunny but not windless summer day. In the middle section of the piece, it may be imagined that with the increasing tumult of the sea arise memories of the historical and legendary associations of the place, especially those connected with King Arthur, King Marke, and Tristram and Iseult. Regarding the last named it will be noticed that at the climax of the central division of the work there is a brief reference to one of the subjects in the first act of Wagner’s *Tristan*.”

Violin Concerto No. 2 (WORLD PREMIERE CONSORTIUM) Jonathan Leshnoff (b. 1973)

Jonathan Leshnoff is winning an international reputation as one of America’s most gifted composers. His works have been programmed and commissioned by the Baltimore, Curtis Institute, Buffalo, Kansas City, Columbus (Ohio), Oakland, Duluth, IRIS, Kyoto, Extremadura (Spain), National Repertory, National Symphony of Mexico, Baltimore Chamber and Boca Raton orchestras, Da Capo Chamber Ensemble, Smithsonian’s Twentieth Century Consort, “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band and other noted ensembles and soloists; he is currently Composer-in-Residence with the Fairfax Symphony. Several recordings devoted to Leshnoff’s music are included in Naxos’ “American Classics” series: one contains the Symphony No. 1 (“Forgotten Chants and Refrains”) and *Rush*, both premiered by Michael Stern and the IRIS Orchestra of Germantown, Tennessee; the second release features the Violin Concerto, performed by violinist Charles Wetherbee and the Baltimore Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Markand Thakar; the third disc contains Leshnoff’s chamber music in performances by IRIS musicians; the Atlanta Symphony’s recording of the Symphony No. 2 and the oratorio *Zohar* was released in November 2016; and in December 2017, the band arrangement of his Clarinet Concerto was issued with Philadelphia Orchestra principal Ricardo Morales and the United States Marine Band. The next scheduled release includes the Symphony No. 4 and Guitar Concerto with soloist Jason Vieaux and the Nashville Symphony. Leshnoff’s honors include two ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Awards, Honorable Mention in the Rudolph Nissim Prize and an Artist Award from the Maryland State Arts Council.

Jonathan Leshnoff was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1973, and simultaneously earned undergraduate degrees in anthropology from Johns Hopkins University and in music composition from the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore; he completed his doctoral work at the University of Maryland. Since 2001, he has been on the faculty of Towson University in Maryland, where he is now Professor of Music.

The following information was provided by Leshnoff Publishing:

The violin is a familiar instrument to Jonathan Leshnoff. It was the instrument he played as a child and into his teens before he “officially” switched to composition in his college years. He has written two other major works for violin that have been widely performed: his Violin Concerto No. 1 for full orchestra, which was written for Charles Wetherbee and recorded on a top-ranked Naxos CD, and his Chamber Concerto for Violin, which was written for Gil Shaham. Leshnoff also has written a Double Concerto featuring violin and viola.

The genesis of Leshnoff’s Violin Concerto No. 2 came from the 2015 Harrisburg Symphony performance of his Double Concerto. Leshnoff arrived at the first rehearsal of the work not knowing the

violin soloist of that performance, Alexander Kerr. He left the concert with a budding friendship with Alex and great admiration for Kerr's performance and technique. Seeing great potential in their artistic collaboration, Kerr commissioned a trio from Leshnoff featuring former Dallas Symphony Principal Horn David Cooper, himself and piano. The success of that Trio led to the co-commission of the Violin Concerto No. 2 by the DSO and the Harrisburg Symphony.

The Concerto is cast in four movements with a melody that appears in all of them. The first movement (*Fast*) begins amid quiet rustling from the upper strings as the soloist presents the soaring melody, commencing kinetic explorations throughout the movement. The second movement (*Yud: Chochma*) is scored only for strings, harp and solo violin. Slow and introverted, the themes seem to emerge from nothing and return to that source. The third movement (*Scherzo*) is brief, utilizing a jaunty theme that is virtuosically passed between soloist and orchestra. In contrast, the lengthy fourth movement (*Fast*) appears as an independent entity, until, at the end, the opening melody is triumphantly brought back. With this melodic unification, the work creates a sense of cohesion and finality, ultimately bringing the Concerto to a bright close.

Jewish mysticism has profoundly influenced Leshnoff's music, and he is in the midst of a ten-work, multi-year project that parallels the fundamental building blocks of Jewish spiritual thought. The authentic Jewish mystical schools outline in great length and detail the spiritual architecture of the universe and its relationship with God and mankind. It is within those systems that Leshnoff draws his inspiration. The second movement of this Concerto will take its place as one of those works. "*Chochma*," in mystical thought, is the unknown, mysterious genesis of any creative idea. Like an embryo, it contains the entire structure in one small "point." This is represented in the second movement of this work, where the lyrical, plaintive melody grows out of the most minimal background and orchestral materials.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, "From the New World" (1892-1893) Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

When Antonín Dvořák, aged 51, arrived in New York on September 27, 1892 to direct the new National Conservatory of Music, both he and the institution's founder, Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, expected that he would help to foster an American school of composition. He was clear and specific in his assessment: "I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. They can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States.... There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot find a thematic source here." Dvořák's knowledge of this music came from Henry Thacker Burleigh, an African-American song writer and student of his who sang the traditional melodies to the enthralled composer. Burleigh later recalled, "There is no doubt that Dr. Dvořák was very deeply impressed by the Negro spirituals from the old plantation. He just saturated himself in the spirit of those old tunes, and then invented his own themes."

The "New World" Symphony was not only Dvořák's way of pointing toward a truly American musical idiom but also a reflection of his feelings about his own country. "I should never have written the Symphony as I have," he said, "if I hadn't seen America," but he added in a later letter that it was "genuine Bohemian music." There is actually a reconciliation between these two seemingly contradictory statements, since the characteristics that Dvořák found in Burleigh's indigenous American music – pentatonic (five-note) scales, modal minor keys with a lowered seventh degree, rhythmic syncopations, frequent returns to the central key note – are common to much folk music throughout the world, including that of his native Bohemia. Because his themes for the "New World" Symphony drew upon these cross-cultural qualities, to Americans, they sound American; to Czechs, they sound Czech.

The "New World" Symphony is unified by the use of a motto theme that occurs in all four movements. This bold, striding phrase, with its arching contour, is played by the horns as the main theme of the sonata-form opening movement, having been foreshadowed (also by the horns) in the slow introduction. Two other themes are used in the first movement: a sad, dance-like melody for flute and

oboe that exhibits folk characteristics, and a brighter tune, with a striking resemblance to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, for the solo flute.

Many years before coming to America, Dvořák had encountered Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, which he read in a Czech translation. The great tale remained in his mind, and he considered making an opera of it during his time in New York. That project came to nothing, but *Hiawatha* did have an influence on the "New World" Symphony: the second movement was inspired by the forest funeral of Minnehaha; the third, by the dance of the Indians at the feast. That the music of these movements has more in common with the old plantation songs than with the chants of native Americans is due to Dvořák's mistaken belief that African-American and Indian music were virtually identical.

The second movement is a three-part form (A-B-A), with a haunting English horn melody (later fitted with words by William Arms Fisher to become the folksong-spiritual *Goin' Home*) heard in the first and last sections. The recurring motto here is pronounced by the trombones just before the return of the main theme in the closing section. The third movement is a tempestuous scherzo with two gentle, intervening trios providing contrast. The motto theme, played by the horns, dominates the coda.

The finale employs a sturdy motive introduced by the horns and trumpets after a few introductory measures in the strings. In the Symphony's closing pages, the motto theme, *Goin' Home* and the scherzo melody are all gathered up and combined with the principal subject of the finale to produce a marvelous synthesis of the entire work — a look back across the sweeping vista of Dvořák's musical tribute to America.