

The Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra
William Schrickel, Music Director

Sunday, November 21, 2021 — 4:00 PM
St. Philip the Deacon Lutheran Church, Plymouth, Minnesota

William Schrickel, conductor

Program

Steve Heitzeg *Fanfare for Prairie Skies*

Georges Bizet Selections from *Carmen*

I. *Prélude—Aragonaise*

II. *Intermezzo*

III. *Séguedille*

IV. *Les Toréadors*

George Walker *Lyric for Strings*

The Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra and William Schrickel dedicate this afternoon's performance of *Lyric for Strings* to those who have suffered and died from COVID-19 and to victims of racial injustice.

Intermission

Antonin Dvorak Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, op. 95
From the New World

I. Adagio. Allegro molto

II. Largo

III. Molto vivace

IV. Allegro con fuoco

Program Notes

Steve Heitzeg (b. 1959) lives in St. Paul, attended Gustavus Adolphus College, and earned a doctorate in composition from the University of Minnesota, where he studied with Dominick Argento. He is the recipient of several major awards, including an Emmy, a McKnight Fellowship, and a Bush Foundation Fellowship. He has composed over 150 works, including symphonies, song cycles, chamber music, film scores, and works for chorus.

In 2002, Heitzeg was commissioned by Gustavus Adolphus College to write a new piece for a concert celebrating the 125th anniversary of the college's band. *Fanfare for Prairie Skies* is the opening movement of the three-part suite Heitzeg created for the occasion, *Of Wind and Wood*. It was premiered on May 3, 2003 and is dedicated "to past band directors and alumni of the Gustavus Band."

Georges Bizet (1838-1875) was enrolled in the Conservatory of his native Paris when he was only nine years old. Over the ensuing nine years, the brilliant prodigy won prizes in piano, solfège, organ and fugue. He was a composition student of Charles Gounod, who engaged Bizet to assist in his own musical projects. Though he won the coveted Prix de Rome at the age of nineteen, Bizet had difficulty establishing himself as a composer, and in his mid-20s, he resorted to teaching the piano and creating arrangements and transcriptions of other composers' music to earn a living. He began and abandoned a number of works and submitted scores unsuccessfully to several competitions. Two of his operas, *The Fair Maid of Perth* from 1863 and *The Pearl Fishers* from 1867, debuted to mixed reviews. Critics complained that his 1872 incidental music for *L'Arlésienne*, a play by Alphonse Daudet, was too complex for the average audience member.

Bizet's final work, *Carmen*, was given its premiere at Paris' Opéra-Comique on March 3rd, 1875. The critics were generally disappointed, and following the first performance, the opera often played to half-empty houses. Having suffered significant respiratory problems for much of his life, Bizet died of a heart attack on June 3rd, the morning after the opera's thirty-third performance, convinced that *Carmen* was a failure. He was 36 years old. *Carmen* was given fifteen additional performances at the Opéra-Comique, the last being on February 15, 1876. It was another seven years before the opera was presented again in Paris. However, a Viennese production that opened in October of 1875, with the spoken dialogue replaced by accompanied recitatives composed by Ernest Guiraud, was a stunning success. Richard Wagner became a fan of the work, and Johannes Brahms viewed the opera twenty times, remarking that he would have "gone to the ends of the earth to embrace Bizet." *Carmen* was the world's second-most-performed opera in the 2019-2020 season, and will be performed by the Minnesota Opera in May, 2022.

Guiraud created two suites of selections from *Carmen*, adjusting Bizet's orchestration to enable the music to be performed without singers. The *Prélude* serves to introduce the motive associated with Carmen and her tragic fate. Guiraud links it to the *Aragonaise*, the brilliant rhythmic music that opens the final act of the opera. The *Intermezzo* is the introductory music to *Carmen's* third act, and the *Séguedille* is a transcription of Carmen's seductive aria from Act 1. *Les Toréadors* is the first music heard in *Carmen*, establishing the opera's setting in Seville and anticipating the excitement of the crowd inside and outside of the bullring in the final act.

George Walker (1922-2018) was born in Washington D.C.. He began studying the piano at the age of five, and nine years later he was enrolled at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. He graduated in four years and was admitted to Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, becoming Curtis' first Black graduate in 1945, after having studied piano with Rudolf Serkin and chamber music with William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky. Walker was the first Black instrumentalist to perform with the Philadelphia Orchestra, appearing as soloist in Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto. A recipient of Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and Fulbright Fellowships, he earned a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music, taught at Rutgers University, and received the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1996 near the end of a career in which he composed more than ninety works.

Walker wrote *Lyric for Strings* when he was still a student at Curtis. Originally the slow movement of a string quartet, the work was initially entitled *Lament* and was created by Walker as a response to the death of his grandmother, Malvina King, a woman to whom the composer had been very close and whose first husband was taken from her when he was sold into slavery. Walker wrote the following note about the piece:

After a brief introduction, the principal theme that permeates the entire work is introduced by the first violins. A static interlude is followed by successive imitations of the theme that lead to an intense climax. The final section of the work presents a somewhat more animated statement of the thematic material. The coda recalls the quiet interlude that appeared earlier.

Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904) was invited in 1891 to move to New York City by Jeannette Thurber, a wealthy socialite who had founded the National Conservatory of Music and wanted the prestigious Bohemian composer to be its director. Dvorak accepted on the condition that talented Native American and African American students would be accepted into the school without having to pay any tuition. Thurber agreed, and Dvorak arrived in the "New World" in 1892, heading the Conservatory for three years. He composed his Symphony No. 9, which he subtitled *From the New World*, in the spring of 1893, several months before traveling with his family by train through the Twin Cities on his way to spending the summer

in the small Bohemian community of Spillville, Iowa. The symphony was premiered in New York on December 15, 1893 at Carnegie Hall.

The symphony's slow introduction, alternately introspective and dramatic, intones a rising-falling motive in the violas, cellos, and horns that will become the main theme of the first movement. The second theme, first played very softly by the solo flute, bears a resemblance to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, one of the dozens of spirituals to which Dvorak had been introduced by Harry Burleigh, one of the composer's African American composition students. Both of these themes will return in all three of the movements that follow.

The second movement features one of symphonic music's most famous melodies, played by the English horn. Set with words some time after its composition, the tune now known as *Goin' Home* was a Dvorak original, not a setting of a pre-existing spiritual. The third movement is a fast, virile dance, a *furiant* that features the woodwinds in its more delicate central section. The finale is a compositional tour de force, introducing a powerful, declamatory theme in the brass, a contrasting sweet melody in the solo clarinet, and ultimately bringing back not only the two themes from the first movement, but also the *Goin' Home* tune from the slow movement. The symphony, which started in a dark and brooding E minor key, concludes in a brilliant flash of light with the winds holding a long and warm E major chord.

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