

## **Program Notes**

By Composer in Residence Bruce Brown  
[May 12, 2018]

Tonight's concert, "American Voices," celebrates music from the United States with two new works by American composers and an interesting twist: a very famous work inspired by our great land, and composed here, but written by a composer from Bohemia, the land we now call the Czech Republic.

### **Skyward!**

Your humble servant (born in 1952, by the way) wrote *Skyward!* in the summer of 2016 as a gift for the JSO's new Music Director, Matthew Aubin.

I watched, with all of you, as several fine musicians conducted the orchestra as an audition, hoping to take Maestro Stephen Osmond's place. Everyone seemed surprised to find that an outstanding conductor, the Artistic Director of New York's Chelsea Symphony and a consultant on the Golden-Globe-winning program *Mozart in the Jungle*, had quietly moved to Jackson.

Matt's wife, Michelle, had joined the staff of Henry Ford Allegiance Health as an orthopedic surgeon. They felt Jackson would be a fine place to live, and he could commute to New York to fulfill his duties there.

Matt's selection as Music Director has brought another outstanding talent to the podium, and it continues Jackson's enviable, and very significant, tradition of having a conductor who lives here and is an integral part of the community.

The inscription for *Skyward!* reads: "For Matt Aubin, in celebration of his leadership of the Jackson Symphony Orchestra and The Chelsea Symphony."

In all my work, I try to capture a sense of the inner life that motivates all of us to dream, hope, love, strive, and when it is needful, to change and grow. I have come, more and more, to consider myself a storyteller, hopefully saying things with music that may be difficult or impossible to put into words.

My purpose in *Skyward!* was to create a sense of enthusiasm, boundless energy and limitless possibilities. The opening fanfares represent the wide-open, blue-sky optimism of new beginnings. Poignant harmonies in the middle section evoke the spirit of inward, thoughtful dreams and ambitions we all share. Lyric solos in the oboe, flute and trumpet mirror quiet hopes we may not dare to utter aloud. The bold opening sounds return to lead the work into a powerful finish, full of determination and promise.

### **Cello Concerto**

Critic Terry Teachout of Time Magazine reviewed a triumphant performance of the *Symphony #2* by Lowell Liebermann (born February 22, 1961) and described the music as "now brazen and glittering, now radiantly visionary." Teachout described Liebermann as "... a composer unafraid of grand gestures and open-hearted lyricism." The New York Times has called Liebermann "as much of a traditionalist as an innovator."

Liebermann grew up in New York and performed his own *Piano Sonata, Op.1* at the age of 16 in Carnegie Hall. He received a bachelor's, master's, and doctorate from the

Juilliard School while studying composition with celebrated teachers including David Diamond and Vincent Persichetti.

His music has delighted audiences all over the world and has been released on CD by more than forty different labels. He has served as the composer in residence for the Dallas Symphony, the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan, and the Sarasota Performing Arts Center. Liebermann currently teaches composition at the Mannes School of Music of The New School in Manhattan, and he is the founding director of the Mannes American Composers Ensemble.

The JSO has joined with the cellist Julian Schwarz and four other orchestras to commission Liebermann to write a new concerto for cello and orchestra. An anonymous fan of Schwarz's also helped support the commissioning project.

Schwarz is a brilliant young cellist who has performed with orchestras throughout the world and won international competitions in Hong Kong and Boulder, Colorado. He is also a passionate supporter of new music and has presented the premiere performances of several works including new concertos by Richard Danielpour and Samuel Jones. His performance of the Jones concerto was broadcast on public television and released on the prestigious Naxos label.

The JSO's Michigan premiere of Liebermann's new concerto promises to be an exciting event, the birth of a beautiful work, and one more landmark chapter in the history of the JSO.

### *New World Symphony*

Richard Freed has written, very insightfully, that in the music of Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904), "warmth of heart is perhaps the most pervasive quality ... Not as a substitute for substance and technical skill, it was simply part of the man's nature ..."

Dvořák had very simple beginnings, taking violin lessons from the schoolmaster in the small village where his father served as the innkeeper and butcher. He left home at the age of sixteen to study music in Prague.

The great composer Johannes Brahms was deeply impressed by Dvořák's music and recommended him for an Austrian State Scholarship that provided much-needed financial support. Brahms also vouched for Dvořák with his own publisher, Fritz Simrock in Berlin, and the publication of Dvořák's *Eight Slavonic Dances* in 1878 led one writer of the time, Louis Ehlert to gush: "Here at last is a hundred percent talent, and what is more, a completely natural talent."

Dvořák went on to write nine symphonies and many other orchestral pieces, several operas, glorious concertos, lots of chamber music, choral music, reams of piano music and songs, and much more, all of it superbly crafted and sublime to hear.

In 1885, philanthropist Jeanette Thurber founded the National Conservatory of Music in America, and in June of 1891, she asked Dvořák to become the director. He accepted and served from 1892 through 1895.

Between December of 1892 and May of 1893 he crafted his Symphony No. 9 in E minor, subtitled "From the New World," which has come to be known simply as *The New World Symphony*.

The New York Philharmonic had commissioned Dvořák's new symphony, and when Anton Seidl conducted the premiere performance at Carnegie Hall on December

16, 1893, the audience responded to each movement with such thunderous applause that Dvořák had to stand and take a bow after every one of them.

The *New World Symphony* quickly became one of the best-loved and most performed symphonies ever written. New York Evening Post called it “the greatest symphonic work ever composed in this country.”

At the Conservatory, Dvořák met Harry T. Burleigh, a gifted African-American student who sang spirituals for him and went on to become an important composer and arranger in his own right. Dvořák later said:

“I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them.”

Dvořák seemed to lump the spirituals and American-Indian music together more than he should have, but it is hard to know what kind of examples he heard. He did later say the *New World Symphony's* second movement was a "sketch or study for a later work, either a cantata or opera..., which will be based upon Longfellow's *Hiawatha*." He never got around to that project, but he also said the third movement, the scherzo was "suggested by the scene at the feast in *Hiawatha* where the Indians dance."

The music of the *New World Symphony* actually has deep roots in the traditions of his Bohemian homeland. When asked if he incorporated authentic “Native American” tunes, he replied:

“I have not actually used any of the melodies. I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the Indian music, and, using these themes as subjects, have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, counterpoint, and orchestral color.”

The beautiful theme the English horn plays in the slow second movement, the *Largo*, is instantly recognizable. Dvořák's student William Arms Fisher put lyrics with the melody in 1922, and the result, the haunting song *Goin' Home*, is often mistaken for an authentic folk song or spiritual.

You might even say the *New World Symphony* has gone beyond international fame. In 1969, Astronaut Neil Armstrong took a recording of it with him on the Apollo 11 mission, the first landing on the moon.