

Daniel Glover, Piano

Notes for Independence Day Program

In celebration of Independence Day, this program spans from the Civil War to the Vietnam War. The composers utilized various indigenous musical styles, and in some cases connected the pieces directly to specific locations within the country.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk was born in New Orleans in 1829, and became one of America's first musical superstars. He studied in Paris and returned home to make a spectacular career. His name was so well known that he was invited to perform for President and Mrs. Lincoln. Despite being from the South, he remained a staunch supporter of the Union throughout the war. His concert piece, "The Union," was composed in 1862 and is dedicated to General McClellan, who was an early hero in the war, but eventually had a falling out with President Lincoln. He ran an unsuccessful attempt to defeat Lincoln for president. The Union begins in a violent and blustery manner, accurately displaying the times. Throughout the piece there are references to the war, and one can hear distant trumpets and drums. It quotes from several American patriotic tunes, including a beautiful harmonization of "The Star Spangled Banner" (which was not yet our national anthem), as well as "Yankee Doodle" and "Hail Columbia." Upon hearing the devastating news of Lincoln's assassination, Gottschalk performed "The Union" on a ship in an impromptu memorial service.

Samuel Barber's "Excursions" has four short movements, each representing a different region of the country. The first movement begins with a Boogie Woogie style repetitive pattern. While the composer didn't specify which region he was referencing, it is clear that this movement is a perpetual motion that could represent a busy New York street, or a fast moving train in motion. At the end we are startled to hear car horns, or those of a train as it goes off into the distance. The second movement is in a lazy blues character, and could be said to represent a smoky bar in New Orleans, or Memphis. The third movement, clearer as to its origins, is a loose set of variations on the song "The Streets of Laredo" (a cowboy town in Southern Texas). The banjo sounds in the final movement conjure up a barn dance in Appalachia. The piece never goes below middle C on the keyboard.

Dave Brubeck was a proud local Bay Area product. Although known as a giant in the field of jazz, he studied serious composition with Darius Milhaud at Mills College. In his student days he wrote a set of pieces called "Reminiscences of the Cattle Country," which related to his experiences of growing up on a cattle ranch. The final movement is a brief personal recollection titled "Dad Plays the Harmonica." Portions of the piece are bitonal, with one hand playing in E-flat and the other in C major. No doubt this pleased his teacher, the modernist Milhaud.

David Guion is perhaps the only composer who has ever won a rodeo in Wyoming! He grew up in the cowboy country of rural Texas. His serious aspirations as a composer and pianist resulted in him going to Vienna to study with Leopold Godowsky. Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War I prompted him to return home. His compositions have a rustic feel to them, and are not as known as they should be. His claim to fame was his arrangement of "Home, Home on the Range." His "Alley Tunes" (Scenes from the South) are charming evocations of a man whistling

in an alley in the dark of night, and a foot stomping, knee slapping foray called “The Harmonica Player.” They date from the late 1920s.

Frederic Rzewski was born in Massachusetts in 1938, and died in 2021 in Italy. He can be considered in the vanguard of contemporary composers. Perhaps the most unique aspect of his compositions is that he purposely didn’t adhere to a specific style. Each piece is in essence its own style. The two North American Ballades, “Dreadful memories” and “Down by the riverside” use folk songs that are familiar. “Dreadful memories” tells the heartbreaking tale of Aunt Molly Jackson, who helped poor coal miners. She claimed to have held hundreds of babies of miners in her arms as they died. The nature of the piece is that of a tender and heart wrenching elegy-lullaby. “Down by the riverside” became popular as a Vietnam War protest song, and was sung by the friend of the composer, Pete Seeger. In “Down by the riverside” there is a gospel style buildup of almost religious fervor, which is followed by statements of the theme in five voices, with five different speeds and five different keys at the same time (B-flat, C, D, E-flat and G)! Rzewski said his model for these pieces were the organ chorale preludes of Bach.

George Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue is recognized as an iconic American classic. The composer accepted a commission to compose it only with reluctance. It was to be a sort of jazz concerto with Paul Whiteman’s jazz band. The original piano solo part was most likely largely improvised at the first performance, because there are long stretches where the piano is unaccompanied. Eventually he wrote it down, and composed this version for piano solo the same year. Gershwin said he was unable to begin the piece for quite a time because he lacked any inspiration. As he was traveling by train into New York from Connecticut and saw the gleaming skyline of Manhattan and knew then and there that it would be a representation of the large urban cityscape. He was certainly inspired, as the piece has retained its appeal for nearly one hundred years. The title of the piece fits the form to perfection, for it is free and rhapsodic, with many references to jazz and blues.

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