

CHARLOTTESVILLE  
**SYMPHONY**

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

# *Academic Festival*

**April 20, 21 & 28, 2024**

## **Program Notes**

For the Charlottesville Symphony's season finale, Music Director Benjamin Rous sought to showcase the UVA Music Department. "Our faculty includes a broad range of 'musicking,'" he notes. "The orchestra has to play in a wide variety of styles on this program. I think this is both a celebration of the amazing musicians we have here in Charlottesville and also a study in how versatile an orchestra can be." He opens and closes with 20<sup>th</sup>-century classics; in between we hear original compositions by four faculty composers.

### ***Overture to West Side Story***

**Leonard Bernstein**

**Born 25 August 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts**

**Died 14 October 1990 in New York City**

**Arranged by Maurice Peress (1930-2017)**

*This is the Charlottesville Symphony's first performance of Overture to West Side Story.*

*Approximate duration 5 minutes*

- *West Side Story* transported Shakespeare's 14<sup>th</sup>-century Verona to 1950s Manhattan.

- Bernstein's score infused gang warfare with Latin and jazz rhythms.
- Notice the expanded percussion section in Maurice Peress's arrangement.
- Essentially a medley, this overture includes segments of dance music and beloved songs from the musical.

Nearly seven decades after its premiere, *West Side Story* has become an American classic. Most of us can easily recall not only tunes but also lyrics to many of its songs. "Tonight", "Maria", "Somewhere", "America" – all are testimony to the enduring appeal of Arthur Laurents's book, Stephen Sondheim's lyrics and, most of all, Leonard Bernstein's music. His *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* have become a staple of the orchestral repertoire.

The original Broadway show had no overture. The score for the show opens with a prologue that is half-danced, half-mimed, setting the stage for a performance where music and dance tell as much of the story as do words. The orchestrator, arranger and composer Sid Ramin is credited with cobbling together a five-minute overture for small ensemble, intended for use by summer stock companies and community productions. The conductor Maurice Peress – who worked with Duke Ellington – crafted this larger arrangement for full orchestra.

A microcosm of the show, the overture starts with music associated with the Jets and the Sharks, setting up the conflict of the two gangs. It then moves to "Tonight" and "Somewhere", with the gang music providing brief transitions. "Mambo" concludes the overture with flair and pizzazz.

The score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets (second doubling E-flat and bass clarinets), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, chimes, drum set, maracas, vibraphone,

bongos, xylophone, glockenspiel, *güiro*, timbales, harp, piano and strings.

**Concerto for Quintet and Orchestra, movements II and III**

**John D'earth**

**Born in 1950 in Framingham, Massachusetts**

*The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed D'earth's Concerto for Quintet and Orchestra in February 2006.*

*Approximate duration 14 minutes*

***Program annotator Laurie Shulman asked composer and jazz trumpeter John D'earth about his Concerto for Quintet and Orchestra. Their conversation follows.***

**L.S.** What prompted you to compose this concerto? Was it a commission? A request from the orchestra's music director? An impetus from within?

**J.D.** I grew up listening to great jazz. My father was an avid and sophisticated listener. I wasn't steeped in classical music. I heard a lot of opera but did not love it until I discovered Puccini as a late teenager. I was transported by *Peter and the Wolf* but I wasn't listening as much to classical music as to jazz. When I was a junior in high school things changed when I heard Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra. I knew then that I wanted to be an orchestral and chamber music composer as well as a jazz musician. Bartók's piece opened my mind to the connection between jazz and classical music. I wanted to fuse the two. In fact, it has always seemed to me that classical composers are similar to jazz musicians: the greats in both genres create an individual voice and work to extend their genres.

Fast forward to 2005. Unbeknownst, it was Carl Roskott's last year as the conductor of what was then called the UVA Symphony Orchestra. Carl commissioned me to write an extended piece for the orchestra and the Free Bridge Quintet. What should it be? I thought about the Bartók. The basic concept of his Concerto for Orchestra was to feature, as soloists, all of the

instruments in the orchestra. The basic concept of a jazz quintet is to feature, as soloists, all of the members of the group. It seemed natural to merge these concepts and the Concerto for Quintet and Orchestra was born.

**L.S.** How does this work differ from other charts or tunes that you perform regularly with the Free Bridge Quintet?

**J.D.** In our regular concerts, Free Bridge generally follows the format of mainstream jazz, which draws on three sources for its repertoire: the blues, the American Songbook, and originals. Most of these tunes are repeated structures that state a melody, then feature extended solos by the members of the quintet. In most cases solos follow the structure of the tune exactly. Classical music does not utilize much improvisation, especially in modern times. Although there is strophism and repetition in classical composition, it tends to use an accretion of forms or, as in Wagner, it may be through-composed. Often, symphonic movements are extended statements that constitute one arc, one musical journey. Miles Davis and the arranger Gil Evans pioneered what [jazz historian and composer] Gunther Schuller called, “the third stream.” Third stream music combines classical and jazz procedures as in the albums *Sketches of Spain*, *Porgy and Bess*, and *Miles Davis, Live at Carnegie Hall*. The Concerto for Quintet and Orchestra is a third-stream composition. These two [performing ensembles], sounding together, prove the lie of the high art/low art distinction.

**L.S.** Can you describe the challenge of combining a jazz ensemble, for which improvisation is an essential component, with a symphony orchestra, which is accustomed to detailed notation specifying notes, rhythm, and dynamics?

**J.D.** Most modern classical musicians have an appreciation for jazz. Several of our orchestra members are accomplished improvisers. When notating jazz, for jazz musicians, there is a

common understanding of how to phrase and how to swing that allows for a more general notation style with fewer articulations or even dynamics. Certainly, the written rhythms are imprecise because there is no way to accurately notate exactly what a jazz musician is doing: if they are great artists they are doing it uniquely, like nobody else (as do the great composers!). This is true of written parts, as well. It reminds me of what my ethnomusicology professor said in 1968, railing against prevailing attitudes, regarding some indigenous African music we were listening to: “We call this music ‘primitive music’ until we try to notate it with our ‘primitive’ notation system.” Carl Roskott and I discussed whether to notate the swing passages as eighth notes (which they actually are not) or to try to render them more accurately as triplets. To me, that would be very hard to read. Better to simply know that the eighth notes are swung and how to do it. So, there is an ask of the orchestra, in this piece, to “feel” the music and intuit the phrasing and articulations to a greater extent than usual.

**L.S.** It seems that rhythm is essential to the two disparate groups collaborating together, and that the governing rhythmic unit of four-bar phrases serves as a unifier. Can you elaborate?

**J.D.** The four-bar unit is a basic structure of blues, jazz, Latin music, song form and, indeed, [much of] classical music. This piece consciously breaks that structure at times, especially in the first movement, which we won’t be hearing [at these April performances]. The beginning of Part II, *Certain Flowers Persist*, is more free form, containing multiple duets between members of Free Bridge and the orchestra principals. In the last movement, *The One*, everything is geared to the folk-form energy of Latin music. The four-measure structure is key to that.

**L.S.** Please explain the subtitles of the two movements we will hear: *Certain Flowers Persist* and *The One*.

**J.D.** *Certain Flowers Persist* are the last three words in a chapter of the Saul Bellow novel,

*Humboldt's Gift*. The passage describes the flora and fauna that survive and thrive in the industrial swamps of places like Bayonne, New Jersey. The phrase stuck with me. It signifies the irrepressible insistency of life and beauty in all circumstances. As a title, *The One* is a multiple entendre because it celebrates the world of dance, of jamming, of grooving, of Afro-Latin saturation, and those things are based on the One, the 1: the first beat, the down beat, the beat that starts all the other beats, and, also, One Love.

**L.S.** Some orchestral players - particularly in the brass section – also have experience playing jazz. How have you taken advantage of this likelihood in the concerto?

**J.D.** In both movements, soloists from the quintet are paired with soloists from the orchestra: the jazz and principal trumpets, the sax and the oboe, the bassoon and the jazz bass, and the drums and percussion. These orchestral players are invited to eschew the written part and improvise. I have also relied on whatever jazz experience the orchestral musicians may have to help move us toward the right feel for the phrasing.

**L.S.** After a four-bar introduction for orchestral strings and winds, *The One* launches into a full three minute dialogue between the orchestral marimba and the quintet's drummer, with a drum solo interpolated midway through. Is it risky to pair an orchestral player with a quintet member? How did you calculate that risk?

**J.D.** This idea of riskiness is a major point of the concerto. I wrote this for I-Jen [Fang] and Jos [Robert Jospé] who are master musicians. They know how to communicate rhythmically, each in their own dialect. They trade statements, equally, throughout this passage. Duke Ellington's idea was to write for the exact voices he had in his orchestra. Mozart, Beethoven and their followers also wrote for specific musicians. It's not risky, it's fun! But you have to know – and trust – the musicians you're writing for.

**L.S.** You have adapted jazz standard concepts in both these movements: the slow ballad morphing to double time swing in *Certain Flowers Persist* and then, after the marimba-drum duet, the Afro-Cuban Rhumba in *The One*. How did you approach combining these tropes with the orchestra?

**J.D.** I wanted the orchestra to participate in those feelings, the feeling of a jazz ballad, the feeling of Latin jazz . I tried to create a musical environment that allowed for the freedom jazz musicians take and require, and one that also provided the direction and specificity that orchestral musicians require. This concerto asks each group – Free Bridge and the orchestra – to join in the other’s perspective.

**L.S.** The strings’ role is primarily as a harmonic anchor, but you’ve given several prominent solo lines to the winds, including bassoon and oboe. What was your thinking for deployment of the string complement?

**J.D.** I thought of the strings as a key orchestral timbre and as a choir providing harmonic depth. But there are some solos as well. The first movement of this piece is entitled, *Bird Lives!* It is meant to inhabit the aspiration that Charlie Parker realized so beautifully on his own favorite recording, *Charlie Parker with Strings*. The string writing reflects that approach. Strings are also prominent in a type of Cuban dance music called *Danza* where several violins play both a rhythmic and a harmonic function. That approach to strings can be heard in *The One*. There is also a lyrical violin solo that prefaces the statement of the ballad by the trumpet in *Certain Flowers Persist*.

**L.S.** What else would you like the audience to know about this work?

**J.D.** When I teach the Jazz Improvisation Workshop at UVA, I tell my students that a creative musician in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be conversant with four traditions: 1. common practice

harmony which comprises Bach to Bird to the Beatles and Burt Bacharach, with Beethoven and Brahms along the way, and even a few composers whose names don't start with B; 2. Black music in the Americas (blues, jazz, gospel, Latin music, etc.); 3. the aleatory revolution in 20<sup>th</sup> century classical music (serialism, neo-classicism, John Cage, minimalism), John Coltrane, and others who seriously mined these developments for practicing, composing, and performing; and 4. world music: music from every corner of human music-making, from jungle to mountaintop, to islands and continents: indigenous global music, almost all of which is available on recordings. All of these traditions inform this Concerto, from the standardized Western harmonies of the ballad, through the serialism of the marimba solos, to the folk-form final movement, and the blues inflection, throughout.

It is pure pleasure to have been encouraged to think in these ways, first by Carl Roskott and, now, by Ben Rous. And there is nothing more personally thrilling (that wouldn't be quite a bit more dangerous) than hearing these thoughts realized by such excellent and savvy musicians!

*This interview has been edited.*

***Flight for Freedom* for Creative Flute and Orchestra**  
**Nicole Mitchell**  
**Born in 1967 in Syracuse, New York**

*This is the Charlottesville Symphony's first performance of Mitchell's Flight for Freedom.*

*Approximate duration 15'30"*

*Nicole Mitchell has provided the following composer's note for her piece.*

Designed to feature a flute soloist, *Flight for Freedom* celebrates Harriet Tubman – one of America's greatest heroes – through the musical illustration of her courage, hardship, vision and creativity while illuminating one of the most volatile periods of American history. Tubman was a champion for human rights through her work in the Underground Railroad and the Civil War.



In the work, I draw connections between African-American cultural expression and the orchestra by weaving jazz aesthetics, improvisation and classical music. Although there are jazz elements throughout the piece, rhythms are phrased directly as they should be interpreted, without the need to “swing” them. The flute soloist has the option to play the entire part as written in the score or can also be free to improvise in sections that are labeled “improvised.”

*Flight for Freedom* is intended to be a multi-movement soundtrack of Harriet Tubman’s struggle. While writing the piece, I envisioned Tubman fearlessly and illusively functioning within the evils of slavery to help others escape, and the intensity of the times in which she lived. Born a slave in 1820, Tubman escaped to freedom in Canada as a youth, but her conscience taunted her to return on countless successful expeditions to rescue hundreds of people trapped in slavery. Later, Tubman worked for the Union during the Civil War as America’s first woman to lead a military operation, and also as a nurse and a spy. A true improviser of her lifetime, Tubman repeatedly and courageously risked her life and faced the unknown out of her love for humanity.

– Nicole Margaret Mitchell

Mitchell’s ten movements flow from one to the next, without pauses. They serve as a narrative encapsulating Tubman’s journey and life experience. Raw and intentionally ugly at the outset, *Flight for Freedom* sets forth the conflict between the North and the South. Solo flute emerges as a free spirit, navigating both regions as she fulfills her vision. “Prayer” is a woodwind serenade in dialogue with solo strings, touching on the feeling of African-American spirituals. “Slavery’s Evil” introduces sliding strings and brass blades that sound like wails of suffering. A substantial solo flute cadenza precedes “Tomorrow’s Promise”, which is improvisatory and freewheeling. Mitchell’s interpretive indication for “A Taste of North” is *With Celebration*, and the piece swings with an upbeat feeling.

*Flight for Freedom* was commissioned by the Chicago Sinfonietta and premiered with the Chicago Composers Orchestra on December 7, 2011. The score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbal, congas, flute

soloist and strings.

***Threnody (Sikuigvik)* for Orchestra and Glacier Ecoacoustics**

**Matthew Burtner**

**Born in 1971 in Naknek, Alaska**

*This is the Charlottesville Symphony's first performance of Burtner's Threnody.*

*Approximate duration 5'30"*

Alaska native Matthew Burtner's compositions explore embodiment, ecology, polytemporality and noise. His ecoacoustic music has been performed in concerts around the world and featured by organizations such as NASA, PBS News Hour, the American Geophysical Union, the BBC, the U.S. State Department under President Obama and National Geographic. He has published three intermedia climate change works including the IDEA Award-winning telematic opera, *Auksalaq*. In 2020, Burtner received an Emmy Award for "Composing Music with Snow and Glaciers", a feature on his *Glacier Music* by Alaska Public Media. His music has also received international honors and awards from a variety of competitions, including Musica Nova (Czech Republic), Bourges (France), Gaudeamus (Netherlands), Darmstadt (Germany) and The Russolo Prize (Italy). He is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Award for *The Ceiling Floats Away*, a large-scale collaborative work with U.S. Poet Laureate, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and UVA faculty member Rita Dove. Burtner holds the position of Eleanor Shea Professor of Music at UVA, where he co-directs the Coastal Future Conservatory. He is also founder and director of the Alaska-based environmental music non-profit organization EcoSono. His composer's note explains the origins and background of the piece.

*Threnody (Sikuigvik)* (2016) was commissioned by the U.S. State Department for performance during President Obama's 2015 visit to Alaska. The work was first presented as sound emanating from a block of glacier ice set in the Anchorage Museum of Art during Obama's GLACIER conference and as interstitial music

during talks about the political response to global warming at the Dena'ina Center in Anchorage. The music is made from a field recording of small popping sounds created when ancient air that has been trapped inside the glacial ice for thousands of years is released into the contemporary atmosphere as the result of the glacier melting. In the center of the piece, we hear the sound of a glacial calving event, a massive slab of ice falling off into the sea. This *Threnody* commemorates the unprecedented and brutal loss of ice since the late 1990s, a scale of melting we did not imagine was possible at the time.

During the performance, a video that Burtner made in Alaska will be projected on a screen above the orchestra. He describes it thus:

The video is made of images I took inside the glacier, showing air trapped inside the ice and surrounded by water, which is a visual presentation of the field recording we listen to during the piece. The images have been mirrored so that we can appreciate the intricate structures found inside the ice. We often see images of glaciers as dramatic mega-structures, but I chose to focus on these hidden micro-forms inside the glacier.

Burtner's score for the orchestra version is for indeterminate instrumentation. Rather than specify the full orchestral complement, he designates that higher or lower wind and brass instruments play in any octave, and to fade in and out of each note "to create a constantly transforming color palate between varied instruments." The score calls for full strings, while the percussion complement is limited to vibraphone, crotales and bass drum. Burtner also specifies that the pre-recorded glacier sounds and electronics be audible at all times, which means that the orchestra's volume rarely swells above a *mezzo piano*.

*Threnody (Sikuigvik)* was recorded by the A4E Ensemble directed by Hasse Borup (former Concertmaster of the Charlottesville Symphony at the University of Virginia) and released on Burtner's 2022 album *Icefield* on the Ravello label. The orchestral version of *Threnody* was premiered by the Loudon Symphony in 2023.

**“Creation” – “Embryo” – “Birth”**

**JoVia Armstrong**

*Arranged for orchestra by Benjamin Rous*

*This is the Charlottesville Symphony’s first performance of Armstrong’s “Creation”, “Embryo” and “Birth”*

*Approximate duration 16’*

JoVia Armstrong’s “Creation”, “Embryo” and “Birth” are the first three tracks from her album with Eunoia Society, *Inception*, released in June 2023 by Black Earth Music. The other three tracks on the CD are “Babies”, “Curiosity” and “Hide, Then Seek”. Clearly this is not only personal music to Armstrong, but also autobiographical.

“The album is about my life, from conception to the day I decided to become a young adult, aged 11 or 12,” she confirms. The original instrumentation is hybrid *cajon* kit, electric violin, electric bass and electric guitar. Benjamin Rous has arranged Armstrong’s three movements for hybrid *cajon* kit and symphony orchestra. “Ben’s arrangement has them out of [context] from the album,” says Armstrong, “but I think this is a good choice for these performances. I just hope these pieces take the audience on an adventurous ride in their spaceship of choice.”

Armstrong wrote with the intent to induce contemplative thought. “[The music] uses a lot of repetition, drones, some arpeggios, improvisation, reverberation and delays, and polyrhythms, she adds. “All these are attributes of contemplative music. These elements are prevalent in my music. It’s a huge part of my research.”

Armstrong’s creative process is quite different from that of a classical composer. Her

process is spontaneous, often unfolding in the moment. She varies her initial starting material. “Sometimes a song may begin with a rhythm and other times a melody. It might be a sample or an ambient loop that I created playing my Rhodes [an electro-mechanical tine piano] through my guitar pedals. I try not to create rules when it comes to creativity. And I never critique my progress as I create! I hit ‘record’ and just play with whatever is around me. I listen back later, and I let the music speak to me.”

She works primarily by herself when composing, sketching out chord charts or melodies. Occasionally she will make a demo recording and send them to her musicians. Rehearsals don’t necessarily precede a recording session. “We just go into a session and play,” she says. “I do allow the musicians to shape the music with their suggestions and changes. It’s best for the music if inspiration hits someone.”

This transference of “Creation”, “Embryo” and “Birth” to symphony orchestra is a new frontier for Armstrong, who has worked closely with Ben Rous on the arrangements. “Ben and I spoke about the endings of a couple of the songs since they segue into each other [on the recording]. I was excited to hear on MIDI what he did with it.”

Rous’s methodology was to listen to Armstrong’s tracks and write them down as aural dictation. “The vast majority of what I did is as literal a representation of what’s on the album as I was able to achieve. This led to a fair amount of extended techniques and intricate rhythmic overlay, especially in “Birth”, where the orchestra tries to approximate some heavily synthesized effects. What’s fascinating is that the original sheet music was a single page – a template – but what the Charlottesville Symphony performs occupies about 100 score pages. I still believe they are both expressions of the same musical idea.”

Orchestral music does not customarily entail improvisation. Rous's arrangement allows it solely for Armstrong's percussion solo. She will be playing *cajon* (a box-shaped percussion instrument of African origin, but more recognized in Peru, played by slapping the front or rear wooden faces) and bongos this weekend. "I let Ben have freedom with this aspect," Armstrong allows. "I don't like it when there's too many cooks in the kitchen. Ben is a genius at what he does, so I felt it best to get out of the way!"

She has never heard her music played by so large an ensemble. "I didn't write it for an orchestra, and I can't wait to hear it! I think it's okay if it's taken out of context, because that means it will be heard in an alternate context that I hadn't thought of. I love that the music can breathe, expand and be something new. It's free to be what it wants to be."

Armstrong's composer's note is personal, with reflections on her parents and herself:

These three compositions from the album *Inception* are snapshots of my life, from conception to the moment I decided to become an adult around age 11. Starting with the song "Creation" when my extraterrestrial father impregnates my human mother. My father is an extraordinary person to me. He grew up in Alabama, near where Sonny Blount (the jazz legend Sun Ra) was raised. They may have even seen the same extraterrestrial being, possibly around the same time. Although my father is an artist who went to school for industrial design, he has the mind of an engineer with a nearly photographic memory. I have seen him accomplish the impossible with very few resources. Doing the impossible is something that Sun Ra spoke of, which is both unexplainable and inspiring. My dad provided me with valuable lessons about the harsh realities of our world, but unfortunately, I was too young to comprehend them fully.

While my father's disposition can be complex, my mother's was much more straightforward. She was an avid reader who retained a wealth of knowledge and resources about everyday life. As most matriarchs are, she was the glue that held our family together. Sadly, we only realize how much they hold until they are gone and things fall apart. She was an intellectual much different from my dad, more grounded in the tangible reality.

"Embryo" and "Birth" are the evolution of my nascency. I feel like I was born in the wrong universe, and possibly even on the wrong planet. People have often called me an

old soul, and many of my friends are much older than me, which makes them much wiser. Although I don't remember much detail about what I learned from them, the message is always evident. Deciding to become an adult around the age of 11 says a lot.

“Embryo” is the sound of my mother’s belly. At least, that’s what I imagine it sounded like. Though I don't remember it vividly, I wish I did. However, I believe that the sound of "Embryo" might still be present in my subconscious. It could be how my mother's womb sounded, and I imagine it was peaceful and safer than the outside world that my father described to me. My birth was the beginning of a chaotic world. According to my mother, it was the easiest birth among her seven children. It's possible that my peaceful and calm personality is a reflection of my birth. People often describe me as a calm and serene individual, and it's interesting to think of that as a direct connect to how I was born.

Rous’s orchestration of Armstrong’s score calls for three flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, *cajon*, bongos, marimba, vibraphone, crotales, cymbals, bass drum, harp and strings.

### ***Boléro***

**Maurice Ravel**

**Born 7 March 1875 in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France**

**Died 28 December 1937 in Paris**

**Arranged by Benjamin Rous**

*The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed Ravel’s Boléro in November 1998 and March 2017.*

*Approximate duration 13 minutes*

- Snare drum provides the pulse for this sultry Spanish dance.
- Ravel’s score is a slow, steady crescendo that builds to a thrilling climax.
- Virtually every instrument in the orchestra has a turn at the theme.
- Benjamin Rous’s expansion allows for all this concert’s soloists to participate in *Boléro*.

The Polish-born composer Alexandre Tansman once told musicologist Roger Nichols:

*Boléro* was first performed as a ballet by Ida Rubinstein, commissioned by her, and it was not a musical success. And then Toscanini came with the New York Philharmonic and played it much faster. And Ravel was not pleased at all. We were in the same box and he wouldn't stand up when Toscanini tried to get him to take a bow. Then he went backstage and told Toscanini, "It's too fast," and Toscanini said, "It's the only way to save the work."

Neither Ravel nor Toscanini could possibly have foreseen the enormous popularity that *Boléro* would achieve. Even before Blake Edwards's film *10* (1979) assured it a permanent place in every pop record collection, *Boléro* was one of the most frequently performed compositions in any concert hall, readily recognized by non-musicians. Something about its insistent, understated (and deceptively simple) rhythm and magnificent, controlled crescendo to the ultimate orchestra climax has captured audience imaginations for six decades. With *Boléro*, Ravel secured an enviable spot in the permanent repertoire.

### **A 2024 take on a 1928 classic**

Benjamin Rous wanted to feature every soloist on this program together in *Boléro*. "Ravel's original is a study of shifting orchestral color, generally set over a single continuous crescendo," he says. "The melody never changes, but since our soloists are all improvisers, I wanted to open the space for them to be able to improvise. So after a short orchestral section which presents the original mostly unchanged, the Free Bridge Quintet recasts the melody as a jazz standard, replete with jazz harmony changes, and then, naturally, proceeds to improvise solos over those chord changes. The rhythmic backbone therefore shifts from that continuous



orchestral snare drum over to Jos's [Free Bridge Quintet's Robert Jospé's] drum set. The next section takes the theme into a sort of bossa nova style, with the rhythm taken over by JoVia. That section includes a feature for Nicole, who is allowed to play in a quite freely improvised style. The finale brings the theme back into its original meter, featuring the full ensemble. Our version stretches Ravel's original idea pretty far – much more of a theme and variations, while Ravel's was basically a theme and repetition – but I think it's very obviously still *Boléro*."

### **"Seventeen minutes of orchestra without any music"**

Ironically, Ravel had very mixed feelings about *Boléro*, dismissing it as a "crescendo on a commonplace melody in the genre of Padilla; *Boléro*: seventeen minutes of orchestra without any music." He told Michel Calvocoressi that it was an experiment:

Orchestral tissue without music... There are no contrasts, and there is practically no invention save the plan and the manner of execution. The themes are altogether impersonal, folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind, and the orchestral writing is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity.

Was it embarrassment in the face of such enormous success that caused him to be so self-disparaging?

### **Ballet with Spanish roots**

Ravel began work on *Boléro* upon returning from a four-month tour in the United States and Canada early in 1928. Prior to his departure he had agreed to compose a ballet for his friend Ida Rubinstein, a former dancer with Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* who had formed her own troupe. Her initial suggestion was an orchestration of pieces from Albéniz's *Ibéria*. After discarding that

idea, Ravel next thought to arrange one of his own pieces. Eventually he began work on an entirely new composition, called *Fandango*. Shortly afterward, he altered the title to *Boléro*, completing the score in a matter of months. The ballet was premiered in November 1928.

For most audience members, the music of Ravel's *Boléro* is so familiar as to not require comment. What may enhance the experience is concentration on the intricacy of the melody, whose rhythmic nuances and sinuous wanderings are vastly more complex than one initially thinks. (Try singing the melody on your own – *not* now! – without a recording in the background to help you along!)

Ravel's incomparable orchestration technique reaches a pinnacle in this work. His masterly tour through the orchestra gives virtually every melodic instrument its chance to shed some new light on the theme. The tessitura is rather high for bassoon and trombone, giving those instruments an opportunity to explore an unusual register. And, of course, these performances are unique, with the addition of jazz improvisation.

Ravel escalates both dynamic level and tension while sustaining a steady pulse and a virtually static harmonic rhythm. The success of his "exercise" has given Western music one of its most treasured orchestral works.

Benjamin Rous's colorful *Boléro* arrangement comprises two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, clarinet in E-flat, two clarinets in B-flat, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, high D trumpet, three trumpets in C, three trombones, tuba, timpani, two snare drums, cymbals, tam-tam, celesta, harp and strings. For these performances, he has added solo flute, solo percussion and solo jazz quintet.

## **Fandango and Bolero**

Both fandango and bolero are Spanish dances in triple time. Fandangos, which are first mentioned in Spanish literature at the beginning of the eighteenth century, are traditionally danced by a couple with accompaniment of castanets and guitar, often with singing as well; the balletic appeal of such a tradition is obvious. By contrast, the bolero is a more recent development, not appearing until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Rarely moving at more than a moderate tempo (whereas the fandango can range from moderate to fast), boleros allowed for more intricate choreography incorporating some highly stylized traditional poses.

by Laurie Shulman ©2024