



Aspiration
September 20 & 21, 2024

PROGRAM NOTES

Swallowtail

Aidan Gold (b.1997)

Swallowtail surges, floats, and tumbles through a fog of childhood memories: mountain landscapes, glaciers, forests, and waterfalls of the Pacific Northwest. I grew up in Seattle and my parents were avid mountain climbers and naturalists, often taking me hiking in the Cascade mountains. I was always fascinated by the immense scale and interconnectedness of the natural world and its broad and diverse ecosystems. All of these images, moments, and textures in the piece are tied together via the memory of a jig that a childhood friend of mine used to warm up on their violin. The piece is in two halves, with the second being a transformation of the first half. After an explosive opening outburst and a distant call from the horns and bowed crotales, a slow and mysterious pulse begins in the

toy piano and metallic percussion. On top of this, a descending figure in the strings gradually develops into a warm lullaby. The second half is in some ways a mirror of the first: the opening outburst is now a distant ocean, and the pulse returns in the low brass, building and gradually overwhelming the lullaby in the end of the piece.

– *Aidan Gold*

Concerto for Violin and Cello in A minor, Op. 102

Johannes Brahms (1833 - 1897)

- “You got Violin in my Cello Concerto!”
 - Robert Hausmann, probably
- “You got Cello in my Violin Concerto!”
 - Joseph Joachim, probably not

The Concerto for Violin and Cello in A minor, Op. 102, was written in the summer of 1887 and was Brahms’

final orchestral work. The concerto was initially written as a response to the cellist Robert Hausmann's request for "a concert-piece for myself." Brahms, a master of efficiency in using and reusing musical ideas when composing, took this to an extreme by using the concerto both to satisfy Hausmann and as a reconciliation present to his estranged friend, the violinist Joseph Joachim, to whom the earlier Violin Concerto was dedicated. Hausmann was not particularly impressed by Brahms's attempt to kill two birds with one stone, complaining that the composer had "gone so far as to put a solo violin into a cello concerto." Nevertheless, Joachim and Hausmann proceeded to rehearse the concerto with Brahms at the piano, and premiered the concerto in the fall of 1887 in Cologne, Germany, with Brahms conducting, before performing the concerto all over Europe. Early reception of the piece was mixed. Clara Schumann wrote that the work lacked "the warmth and freshness which are so often found to be in his works." Another of Brahms's friends, Theodore Billroth, described the Concerto as "tedious and wearisome, a really senile production." Joachim,

though, greatly admired the work, eventually ranking it above the other Violin Concerto without a solo cello part. Today, the piece is universally beloved, although more rarely performed than the single instrument concerti, but only because of the logistical challenges in finding two equally matched soloists willing to share the spotlight.

– *Joseph Morag*

Symphony No.1 (Afro-American Symphony)

William Grant Still (1895 - 1978)

William Grant Still's Afro-American Symphony is not only his most beloved work, but also an indispensable part of the twentieth-century orchestral canon: for a time, the piece was the most frequently performed

symphony by an American composer. Still began sketches for the Symphony in 1924, but completed the bulk of the piece several years later. The composer explained: “It was not until the Depression struck that I went jobless long enough to let the Symphony take shape. In 1930, I rented a room in a quiet building not far from my home in New York, and began to work. I devised my own Blues theme (which appears in varied guises throughout the Symphony, as a unifying thread), planned the form, then wrote the entire melody. After that I worked out the harmonies, the various treatments of the theme, and the orchestration.” Once he began work on the piece in earnest, Still composed quickly, completing the score in a little over a month.

Still’s use of the Blues as the Symphony’s “unifying thread” reflects his engagement with the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance. As musicologist Douglas Shadle

notes, Still drew inspiration from philosopher Alain Locke's concept of "the new African American as an individual who would vindicate blackness from racist stereotypes and reclaim it from white exploitation." By putting the Blues at the center of his composition, Still demonstrates the inherent value of Black folk music and places it on the same footing as the European symphonic tradition.

The Afro-American Symphony is cast in four movements, which Still labeled in his notes and in interviews with descriptive titles. The opening movement, "Longing," marries the 12-bar blues with sonata form, the traditional structure for the first movement of a symphony. The inner movements, respectively, convey "Sorrow" through wistful harmonies and "Humor" through jaunty melodies (note the resemblance to George Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," written the same year). The finale features a solemn chorale, vivacious interlude, and blazing final peroration.

– **Mark Seto**