

A SEASON OF CONTRASTS

MUSIC INTERSECTS, MERGES, AND SOMETIMES COLLIDES
THROUGHOUT THE 2013-2014 SEASON

BY EDDIE SILVA



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DILLIP VISHWANATH

Art is made by human beings. And because human beings make art, the reasons for making it are as complex as the human animal. From a certain perspective, music history may appear as a sequence of innovations followed by innovations. However, by looking at the history of music as a history of human struggle, humanity emerges: rivalry, jealousy, competition, ego, desire for fame, desire for wealth, desire for lithe and beautiful lovers—mixed in with some friendship and camaraderie too. A universe of influence sets in motion the sequence of innovations.

A theme that runs throughout the 2013-2014 St. Louis Symphony season is the exploration of the myriad ways in which music intersects or collides. It is a season of contrasts, which may reveal likenesses and unlikenesses, shared influences, disputes, and hidden associations in the music. St. Louis Symphony Music Director David Robertson understands that dramatic contrasts may exist within a single work. Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, for example, displays exhilaration, passion, and energy combined with "indescribable peace and calm." In programming this season, Robertson set out to explore such contrasts between different compositions within a concert, "linking works, time periods, and themes in unusual ways." By way of this thematic scheme, concerts with distinctive crosscurrents of ideas result. A broad musical canvas is provided the St. Louis Symphony musicians, as

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well, upon which they may show their stuff, their “amazing range and expressive power,” as Robertson describes that stuff.

So in this season Beethoven meets the contemporary Australian composer Brett Dean; Brahms duels with Wagner (they were intense rivals), with Schoenberg as an unlikely mediator; George Gershwin and John Adams make “our American musical sandwich,” as Robertson describes the October program; Steve Reich’s “fantastic cumulative energy” matches the “rhythmic drive” of *Carmina burana*.

Opening Weekend serves as an ideal introduction for this season of contrasts: Charles Ives’ *Three Places in New England*, Aaron Copland’s *Lincoln Portrait*, and Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1. At first glance, these composers appear to be far apart musically: Ives the iconoclast, Copland in his populist mode, and Tchaikovsky, the romantic Russian melodist. But Robertson suggests, “We may get to the nature of their connections in concert. The works become closer than we have thought.”

Ives and Copland both have New England connections. Ives lived his life in Connecticut; Copland, although a native of Brooklyn, maintained close associa-

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tions with New England music institutions such as the Boston Symphony and Tanglewood. Both composers make use of folk and popular music in their compositions. Ives is often exploring the links between music and memory, especially his very personal memories of the music of his childhood: the bands his father and others led in the town square and marching down Main Street in Danbury, Connecticut. Copland, as with many composers during the 1930s, sought out the music people made in the hills, hollers, and cantinas far away from the grand urban concert halls, as a means toward invigorating the music he was writing for those halls.

In these specific works, however, Ives and Copland share more than regional associations or a love for old songs. There is a national mythos at work when pairing these works: America’s Iliad, the Civil War.

The first movement of Ives’ *Three Places* refers specifically to historical artifact: St. Gaudens’ bronze memorial to “Col. Shaw and His Colored Regiment” in Boston Common (Shaw and his company of African-American soldiers—many who were former slaves—were popularized in the 1989 film *Glory*, starring Matthew Broderick, Denzel Washington, and Morgan Freeman). Ives’ father was the leader of a U.S. Army band during the Civil War, and *Three Places* includes marching tunes and old songs, as if heard in distant memory.

Copland set to writing *Lincoln Portrait* as a commission to compose a musical portrait of a major American figure. With World War II raging in Europe and Asia, Copland turns to Lincoln’s words, most famously those that conclude the Gettysburg Address. Copland uses what he called his “accessible style” to frame Lincoln’s words, which give meaning and purpose to the lives lost at Gettysburg, and by

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The St. Louis Symphony plays “with amazing range and expressive power” says Robertson.

association, in 1942, those who will fall in the world conflict.

With Civil War spirits haunting the music of Ives and Copland, what is Tchaikovsky doing here? Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concert was first premiered in Boston by the Boston Symphony—a place and orchestra greatly familiar to Ives and Copland. And consider the date of that premiere: 1875, a decade after the Civil War. The nation was about to enter into one of its most contentious presidential elections, which would lead to the end of Reconstruction, with federal troops removed from the old confederacy.

The Boston audience that first heard Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1 was in the midst of the crosscurrents of history—as we all are at any time. George Ives, Charles’ musical father, would have known of this premiere. What echoes through time?

But even if we realize what may connect these works, the musical contrasts remain. Ives, Copland, and Tchaikovsky express themselves through very different musical languages, each with his own distinct idiom. They emerge from different places and times and write from and for those places and times. Tchaikovsky was distancing himself from a Russian nationalist movement back home to become an international composer. Copland was moving from his modernist tendencies to become a distinctly American, if not *the*, American composer. Ives wrote at night for imagined audiences before returning to the office of his insurance firm in the day.

Where meanings may be found, the marvels of the orchestra are always evident. This is especially so when the agility of the St. Louis Symphony musicians is on display. Robertson often comments on the “stylistic ingenuity” of the orchestra; the musician’s ability to “turn on a dime” and play “an extraordinarily wide range of repertoire with both technical sensitivity and heartfelt passion.” As deep as the ideas may be within a program, in the end it is the sounds of the orchestra that propel those ideas, making our own memories

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