

SPRING WITH COPLAND & SCHUMANN: MUSICAL AWAKENINGS

February 10*, 2023 • 7:30 PM

February 11, 2023 • 7:30 PM

February 12**, 2023 • 2:00 PM

*Friday Classics sponsored by Lexus of Edmonton

**Robbins Sunday Classics sponsored by The Robbins Foundation

Featuring:

Michael Stern, conductor

Robert Uchida, violin

COPLAND

Appalachian Spring

(26')*

PROKOFIEV

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op.63

(27')*

Allegro moderato

Andante assai

Allegro, ben marcato

INTERMISSION (20 MINUTES)

SCHUMANN

Symphony No. 1 in B-flat Major, Op.38 "Spring"

(32')*

Andante un poco maestoso – Allegro molto vivace

Larghetto

Scherzo: Molto vivace

Allegro animato e grazioso

Program subject to change.

*indicates approximate performance duration

***Appalachian Spring* (Ballet for Martha)**

Aaron Copland

(b. Brooklyn, 1900 / d. New York, 1990)

First performance of the ballet: October 30, 1944, in Washington, D.C.

First performance of the suite from the ballet: October 4, 1945, in New York

Last ESO performance of the suite: November 2006

“When I wrote *Appalachian Spring*, I was thinking primarily about Martha and her unique choreographic style, which I knew well. Nobody else seems quite like Martha.” Aaron Copland’s words certainly make it clear why he subtitled his ballet as a dedication to its choreographer, Martha Graham. Today, the work is a part of the American artistic identity; it is one of Copland’s most famous and beloved scores. But even Copland says that the reason for its very “Americanness” is also tied in with Graham’s personality. “She’s very American,” he wrote, “there’s something prim and restrained, simple yet strong, about her which one tends to think of as American.”

Graham was an innovative and influential choreographer in the mid-20th century, creating new ways of movement within ballet’s discipline which greatly modernized the form. She commissioned many scores from many composers, many of which interpreted America’s history and folklore. She had wanted to create a piece with Copland for quite some time, yet this would be their only collaboration. And even this one had a difficult gestation, with postponed deadlines, slow progress, and wartime complications all contributing. The idea had been a work of about a half an hour, for a small-sized ensemble, that would be performed with other new works. Copland’s original title was, in fact, *Ballet for Martha*, and was based on a rather open-ended program – it was only later that Graham created the story we now have of the settling by religious fundamentalists of rural Pennsylvania. The title *Appalachian Spring* did not come along until very late in the game.

The quiet story of a young married couple growing into their community is a long way from the original conception, yet the work – particularly as a concert piece – has become a standard. It concludes with a set of variations on the Shaker hymn “The Gift to Be Simple,” and its colours and insouciance are as much an idealized portrait of Americana as the works of Currier and Ives or Norman Rockwell.

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op.63

Sergei Prokofiev

(b. Sontsovka, 1891 / d. Moscow, 1953)

First performed: December 1, 1935, in Madrid

Last ESO performance: January 2020

Prokofiev only wrote two violin concertos, and they are as different from each other as they could possibly be and still have come from the same hand. His first was written in 1917, when he was 26, and still the brash *enfant terrible* who embraced the “age of steel” modernism of the day. He was anxious to make his mark on the world, but after attempting to establish himself, first in Europe and then in the United States, he returned, chastened, to his home – which was now the Soviet Union.

To earn his living safely and in comfort, Prokofiev the rebel became much more of a conformist, and the biting edge of the first concerto became broadly conceived, sweeping themes in the

second. The demands on the soloist, however, are extraordinary. Prokofiev's friend, the fine violinist Robert Soetens, premiered the work in December 1935.

"The variety of places in which that concerto was written is a reflection of the nomadic concert-tour existence I led at that time," Prokofiev says in his biography. "The first theme of the second movement in Voronezh, the orchestration I completed in Baku, while the first performance was given in Madrid."

The first movement is built around two large themes, quite Russian in flavour. The orchestral accompaniment to the soloist in the lyrical second movement is unique, almost as if the solo violin is singing to a bare, guitar-like backdrop. The flaring, at times violently-tinged third movement is a vigorous Russian dance, putting the soloist through some dashing paces before the finish.

Symphony No. 1 in B-flat Major, Op.38 "Spring"

Robert Schumann

(b. Zwickau, Saxony, 1810 / d. Endenich, 1856)

First performed: March 31, 1841, in Leipzig

Last ESO performance: November 2010

It was Schumann himself who appended the nickname "Frühling" ("Spring") to his *First Symphony*, and it is apt for a number of reasons. The most literal of these is that Schumann had originally attached an inscription to the score, citing his work as, "a symphony inspired by a poem of Adolph Böttger," a poem in praise of spring. Further, the individual movements were originally to be subtitled thusly: "Spring's Awakening" (first movement), "Evening" (second movement), "Happy Place" (third movement), and "Spring in Full Bloom" (fourth movement). Ultimately, he discarded these prior to the symphony's publication.

But the work also could be said to have originated during the spring of Schumann's life. The year before the work was first performed, Schumann finally married Clara Wieck, after years of bitter objection from Clara's father. Flush with this happy occasion, Schumann produced dozens of new works. Indeed, the original sketch for his *First Symphony* was completed in only four days. Felix Mendelssohn conducted the work's premiere, at a concert to benefit the musicians' pension fund in Leipzig.

The opening fanfare was intended by Schumann to represent, "a coming from on high, like a call to awaken." This slow and stately beginning gives way to youthful joy in the movement's *Allegro molto vivace*. The second movement, a serene and melodious *Larghetto*, shows strongly the maturing compositional voice of Schumann, with its lyrical and detailed line.

The Scherzo follows without a pause following the second movement. Belying the root of the very word "scherzo" (from the Italian word for "joke" or "jest"), this music has a dark hue to it, though it is everywhere energetic. The movement also features two distinct trio sections. The final movement bursts out with all the life Schumann's original subtitle suggested. This is music of serenity, joy, and sunshine – evocative of this time in the composer's life, a time which ultimately was not to last, but is here given full, unbounded vent.

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