

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY
FOLK MUSIC OF THE AMERICAS
MICHAEL STANLEY, GUEST CONDUCTOR
MARCH 2, 2025
PROGRAM NOTES

This concert, "Folk Music of the Americas," highlights the ways in which folk music has influenced classical composers and been incorporated into their orchestral works to great effect. The program draws on vastly different styles and time periods with composers of Mexican, American and European backgrounds and illustrates how each of them drew inspiration from folk music to craft works of great authenticity and passion.

Danzón No. 2 – Arturo Márquez (b. 1950)

Opening the concert is **Danzón No. 2**, one of the most well-known works of Mexican classical music. Composer **Arturo Márquez** is a multinational composer who descends from a long line of Mexican folk musicians. Born in Mexico, he spent his middle and high school years in Southern California before returning to Mexico to begin his formal musical training at the Mexican Music Conservatory. He later studied privately in Paris and earned his MFA in composition from Cal Arts on a Fulbright scholarship.

The Mexican danzón is an elegant partner dance, full of syncopated rhythms and sultry melodies. Márquez described it as representing "sensuality, nostalgia, and jubilant escape." The danzón originated in Cuba, where it evolved from the habanera, itself a descendant of the French contredanse. In Cuba the music acquired elements of Creole and African rhythmic complexities to create a unique fusion of European, Latin and African influences. Later it migrated to Mexico, where Márquez first experienced it, becoming especially popular in Veracruz and Mexico City.

Based on and inspired by the authentic folk dance, Danzón No. 2 develops musical themes composed by Márquez to evoke the spirit of the original. The work has two contrasting sections which alternate and build to passionate climaxes. As in a true danzón, it begins with a slow introduction featuring a seductive clarinet solo. When the oboe joins in to make it a duet, one can imagine the instruments representing two dance partners circling each other on the dance floor.

The B section begins with the abrupt introduction of a brash contrasting rhythm more akin to the tango, a distant cousin of the danzón. This builds to a fiery peak that eventually fades into the piano reintroducing the alluring A theme to the accompaniment of a clave rhythm. Both sections repeat with ever increasing intensity building to a final impassioned climax.

Suite from Appalachian Spring – Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Perhaps no composer is more associated with the "American" sound than **Aaron Copland**. A native New Yorker, Copland studied composition with famed teacher Nadia Boulanger in Paris. In the 1930's he began incorporating American folk elements into his music with great success. ***Appalachian Spring*** (1944) was the third of Copland's three

major ballet scores to incorporate folk music. The first two, *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942), depicted elements of the American West using authentic cowboy songs and American folk tunes. *Appalachian Spring* shifted the focus to rural Appalachia in late 19th century Pennsylvania and featured an authentic Shaker tune, "Simple Gifts."

Commissioned for American dance icon Martha Graham, *Appalachian Spring* was an immediate success, winning Copland the 1945 Pulitzer Prize in Music. The title was selected by Graham, taken from a poem by American poet Hart Crane which contained the line "O Appalachian Spring!" The story centers on a young pioneer couple in rural Pennsylvania Dutch country, whose community comes together to build the newlyweds a farmhouse as a wedding gift. Of the ballet story, Copland wrote:

"The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, which their new domestic partnership invites. An old neighbor suggests, now and then, the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house."

Originally scored for 13 instruments, Copland extracted a concert suite from the ballet score and later orchestrated it for full symphony. The suite is organized in eight continuous sections, beginning with a slow introduction that introduces the characters. Scene two bursts into a lively Allegro to ignite the action, followed by a duet for the bride and her intended in scene three, filled with tenderness and passion. When the fast tempo returns in scene four, it depicts the Revivalist preacher and his flock. Here Copland uses folk elements suggestive of square dances and country fiddlers. Scene five is an animated dance of anticipation for the Bride, originally danced by Graham herself, with emotions ranging from joy to fear to wonder. Scene six recalls the introductory material and transitions into the climactic scene seven, based on the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts." The work ends with a peaceful coda, intoning a hushed, prayerlike chorale before fading into a final recollection of the opening music.

Symphony No. 9 – "From the New World" – Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

At first glance, Czech composer **Antonín Dvořák** seems an unlikely choice for a program focused on folk music of the Americas. However, he was part of the musical nationalism movement in Europe, in which composers utilized musical ideas of their country, region or ethnicity, such as folk tunes, and melodies, rhythms and harmonies inspired by them. Dvořák frequently employed aspects of the folk music of Moravia and his native Bohemia to create a style that blended the classical symphonic tradition with folk influences.

In 1892, Dvořák journeyed to America to assume the directorship of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City. Upon his arrival, Dvořák sought to understand what constituted "American music" and immerse himself in it. He came to believe that African American spirituals and Native American folk music would form the foundation of an American style of composition, just as Czech folk idioms informed his music back home. While in the U.S., Dvořák composed in a different style to reflect these influences.

Symphony No. 9, "From the New World," was composed in the winter and spring of 1893 on a commission from the New York Philharmonic, which gave the premiere in December of that year. It was perhaps Dvořák's greatest public musical triumph. The first movement is in sonata form, beginning with a slow introduction that gives way to an energetic Allegro molto featuring three musical themes, the third of which bears a striking resemblance to the African American spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." The second movement opens with a beautiful chord progression in the brass which returns at the end to close the movement. The main theme, presented by the English horn, is so reminiscent of a spiritual that it was later given lyrics and the title "Goin' Home." The third movement Scherzo suggests Native American dance influences. The fourth movement has two main themes of its own and ends with a cyclical recalling of material from the first three movements to tie it all together.

~Michael Stanley