

ALBANY SYMPHONY

BEETHOVEN'S "EROICA"

SATURDAY | OCTOBER 9, 2021 | 7:30 PM
PALACE THEATRE

DAVID ALAN MILLER, CONDUCTOR

Jessie Montgomery
(B. 1981)

Coincident Dances

Jean Sibelius
(1865-1957)

Selections from Lemminkäinen Suite

"The Swan of Tuonela"

"Lemminkäinen's Return"

INTERMISSION (20 Minutes)

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Symphony No. 3, 'Eroica'

I. Allegro con brio

II. Marcia funebre: Adagio assai

III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace

IV. Finale: Allegro molto

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Jan Swafford begins his discussion of Beethoven's Symphony No. 3 with the following thoughts, ones that many of us non-composers often have when we hear any piece of music: "How does a composer forge a great symphony, with its span of nearly an hour and its myriad notes? Among human endeavors, shaping a long work of music is one of the hardest things to do well. Very few people have ever been consistently good at it. No matter how long the piece takes to write, every note has to be marshaled to the same purpose, and in performance it should unfold as effortlessly as an improvisation. From the outside, the job seems superhuman. As Beethoven saw it from the inside, it was done one quilled note, one theme, one phrase, one transition, one section, one movement at a time."

Another Albany Symphony season begins tonight, with opportunities to appreciate the inspired work of three composers who plucked out of the ether sounds they wanted to share with the world.

JESSIE MONTGOMERY *COINCIDENT DANCES*

Jessie Montgomery is an acclaimed composer, violinist, and educator. She is the recipient of the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation, and her works are performed frequently around the world by leading musicians and ensembles. Her music interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, language and social justice, placing her squarely as one of the most relevant interpreters of 21st-century



American sound and experience. Her profoundly felt works have been described as "turbulent, wildly colorful and exploding with life" (*The Washington Post*).

Montgomery was born and raised in Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1980s, during a time when the neighborhood was at a major turning point in its history. Artists gravitated to the hotbed of artistic experimentation and community development. Her parents—her father a musician, her mother a theater artist and storyteller—were engaged in the activities of the neighborhood and regularly brought Montgomery to rallies, performances, and parties where neighbors, activists and artists gathered to celebrate and support the movements of the time. It is from this unique experience that Montgomery has created a life that merges composition, performance, education and advocacy.

Since 1999, Montgomery has been affiliated with The Sphinx Organization, which supports young African American and Latinx string players. She currently serves as composer-in-residence for the Sphinx Virtuosi, the Organization's flagship professional touring ensemble. She was a two-time laureate of the annual Sphinx Competition and was awarded a generous MPower grant to assist in the

development of her debut album, *Strum: Music for Strings* (Azica Records). She has received additional grants and awards from the ASCAP Foundation, Chamber Music America, American Composers Orchestra, the Joyce Foundation and the Sorel Organization.

To learn more about Jessie Montgomery, visit jessiemontgomery.com.

FROM THE COMPOSER

Coincident Dances is inspired by the sounds found in New York's various cultures, capturing the frenetic energy and multicultural palette one hears even in a short walk through a New York City neighborhood. The work is a fusion of several different sound-worlds: English consort, samba, mbira dance music from Ghana, swing, and techno.

My reason for choosing these styles sometimes stemmed from an actual experience of accidentally hearing a pair simultaneously, which happens most days of the week walking down the streets of New York, or one time when I heard a parked car playing Latin jazz while I had rhythm and blues in my headphones. Some of the pairings are merely experiments. Working in this mode, the orchestra takes on the role of a DJ of a multicultural dance track. —J.M.

JEAN SIBELIUS

SELECTIONS FROM LEMMINKÄINEN SUITE

When Jean Sibelius (1865-1956) received an honorary degree from Yale in 1914, the citation said, "His works, his power and originality made him from the very beginning of his career one of the most prominent of contemporary composers. What Wagner



did for the sagas of ancient Germany, Sibelius has done in a magnificent way for Finnish myth and the national epics of Finland. He has translated *Kalevala* into the international language of music."

Sibelius was born into the century that saw the collecting of native Finnish poems and folk tales by Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884). This collection became the *Kalevala*, and it was around many of these stories that Sibelius wrote his early music, before the appearance of his seven symphonies.

Though the suite of these scenes from the life of the flawed hero Lemminkäinen was premiered in 1895, the score underwent revisions until as late as 1939. As Maestro David Alan Miller notes, these are "individual pieces inspired by episodes in the story," and, as such, they do not tell the entire, chronological story.

The first movement of the suite takes place on Saari, an island to which Lemminkäinen's doting mother sent him after he disobeyed her. He is to stay here for three years and, one assumes, develop common sense. However, the island is

made up exclusively of young women, from whom he asks a home. He sings to them, of course, and charms them—until the men return. Off he must go! Listen for the French horns (heroic brass) at the beginning; the lively dance music; ominous minor key rumblings; sweeping love music in the strings; and the quiet ending, Sibelius' way of showing Lemminkäinen's departure from the island.

The second selection, which is often played as a standalone concert piece, depicts one of Lemminkäinen's earlier hero trials. In order to win the hand of a young woman, he is ordered to kill the Swan of Tuonela, who floats on the black river surrounding the isle of the dead. Lemminkäinen, however, is killed, and his corpse hacked to pieces. (Another example of his mother coming to the rescue: she reassembles his body parts.) This evocative music focuses on the placid, paddling, and protective swan, featuring the haunting English horn, with lovely cello commentary.

The last movement of the suite concerns Lemminkäinen's return home after various struggles, but even that effort is temporarily thwarted by an enemy who freezes the river his boat is on. He and his friend disembark and ride home on horses over the ice. Note the triumphant mood evoked by the forward motion of the strings, blasts from the brass, rapid wind playing, and decisive chords: home, resolution.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

SYMPHONY NO. 3, "EROICA"

One contemporary critic of Symphony



LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

commented, "Beethoven's music could soon reach the point where one would derive no pleasure from it unless well trained in the rules and difficulties of the art, but rather would leave the concert hall... crushed by a mass of unconnected and overloaded ideas and a continuing tumult by all the instruments."

Though Beethoven supposedly altered the dedication of this symphony to his hero, Napoleon, after that general declared himself Emperor, the work is, nevertheless, called *Eroica*; and if a hero is one with uncommon stature, then this work stands out from anything that preceded it. Coming in at around 50 minutes, it dwarfs any symphonies by Haydn, Mozart, and, up to that time, the two by Beethoven himself. No wonder that critic was stunned.

The first movement, in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, starts off with two sharp blows, after which Beethoven outlines an E-flat major triad. This motive reappears throughout, transformed. A quieter second theme appears in the winds. The long exposition is repeated and the development section begins. Snatches of the dramatic hammer blows, the subtle evocation of the triad, the fragmentation of familiar motives, fugal gestures and stunning harmonic dissonance makes this part of the movement thrilling. The recapitulation is announced by the French horn, and the material we originally heard returns, mostly unadorned. The coda is, perforce, nearly as long as the exposition in order to be worthy of all that has gone before, and the movement concludes with three orchestral strikes, reminding us of the opening strokes.

The second movement is in E-flat's relative minor, C-minor. It is a funeral march, popular in French marches and operas around that time. The movement begins with a little halting figure that forms the core of the movement. The step is deliberate, reinforced by drums; the orchestral coloring is mournful, with oboe and bassoon getting a chance to solo; the lower instruments are prominent; and the line walks up and down the scale, with some chromaticism. This is a long procession. The outbursts of grief are pronounced, but at the end there is, perhaps, resignation.

The third movement (in ABA form) starts with a small figure that runs up and down the scale, eventually between B-flat and E-flat. Listen for the occasional syncopation, the fugal gestures, the dynamic contrasts, the way this motive is passed around the sections of the orchestra, and

the steady strings that provide the pulse. The three horns announce the trio, which swings along without the insistent string work of the scherzo section. Then the scherzo returns, and all is recognizable except for one clever change in meter as the E-flat major chord is being outlined, and, then of course, the coda.

After a brief and swirling introduction, the last movement begins with a first theme in the plucked strings around the interval E-flat to B-flat. The winds subsequently pick up a second tune on E-flat to G, the opening notes of the first movement and a reference to the melody Beethoven created in the ballet, *The Creatures of Prometheus* in 1801. These two themes get, according to Edward Downes, 12 variations: in key, rhythm, and instrumentation. A rollicking journey ensues, concocted as only the master could. The oboe begins the coda just at the point of greatest tension. The tempo slows, and these measures are quite beautiful, with different colors and moods emerging one after another. But the piece must—and does—end with a wallop. The horns take center stage; the drum sounds; and that E-flat to G gets yet one more extended treatment. With his boundless creative genius, Beethoven has made something of the tiniest scrap of musical material. Extraordinary! The symphony was premiered on April 7, 1805, in Vienna.

Sibelius and Beethoven program notes by Paul Lamar. Montgomery program note by the composer.