

THE CRANE WIND ENSEMBLE

Program Notes • Friday, 21 September 2018

Heartfires

I find it surprising that the word “heartfire” has not entered the lexicon of English expression. This portmanteau embodies that burning passion we all feel at some point in our lives, but do we have the courage to take time and effort to manifest that deeply felt love in word or deed?

Each of the works on tonight’s program embodies the *heartfire* of its respective composer in rather disparate ways. Leonard Bernstein’s centennial celebration offers us the opportunity to encounter his brash and unabashed spirit. *Slava!* served as a celebration of and gift of friendship to a kindred soul, Mstislav “Slava” Rostropovich – the world-class cellist and conductor. However, following an act of civil disobedience in 1970, the Soviet government banned Rostropovich from touring. It was through Bernstein’s efforts that Slava was finally granted, after a hiatus of four years, an exit visa to tour abroad once more. The composition is quintessential “over-the-top” Bernstein. Yet it keeps in mind its dedicatee, even if in a bit of a sly, “Lennie” wink.

Percy Aldridge Grainger was a man whose *heartfires* tore at him, both literally and figuratively. Capable of extremes in almost every domain of human endeavor, he was an intensely physical person – borne out in how he played the piano and in his athletic pursuits. He was keen to experience the limits of human expression, and this yearning found its way into many of his works. Smitten by British Folk music, Grainger sought to preserve it, as did many of his contemporaries: Vaughan Williams, Sharp, Balfour Gardiner and Holst. In typical Grainger fashion, this endeavor went to depths of specificity others ignored. With the use of Edison’s wax cylinder recorder, Grainger not only recorded singers in their native locales, but he then meticulously transcribed their singing and even wrote essays about the singers themselves. One could easily argue that Grainger pioneered Ethnomusicology as a distinct discipline. Although tonight’s Grainger selections were not collected by the composer, his love for this music, and for the people that sang “so sweetly to me,” is unmistakable.

I can think of no other composer for who the term *heartfire* evokes a way of being. An intensely spiritual composer, David Maslanka’s compositions peer deeply inward, grappling with core existential issues. Maslanka found great comfort in the chorales of J.S. Bach and created reharmonizations for 117 of those, played as part of his daily meditations. It is not at all uncommon for the spirit of Bach and his works to play a role, either indirectly or directly, in Maslanka’s compositions. Ironically, he found the wide-open spaces of Missoula, Montana to be his most intimate workshop, and drew great energy and inspiration from the images he received while on long walks in the wilderness. This movement, like so much of his music, is meditative, and strikingly humane in character.

It seems evident that person’s faith and belief can serve as a direct expression of *heartfire*. Carlos Simon’s wonderful work *AMEN!* is a literal “gift of love” – an affirmation and celebration of the bonds inherent in family and faith. It captures the quintessence of his youthful church experiences, drawing upon many of the music traditions in Gospel and Jazz music, evoking music those traditions inspired in the idiom of wind band music.

SLAVA!

Leonard Bernstein

When Mstislav Rostropovich (“Slava” to his friends) invited Leonard Bernstein to help him launch his inaugural concerts as Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra, he also asked him to write a rousing new opening piece for the festivities. This *Overture* is the result, and the world premiere took place on October 11, 1977, with Rostropovich conducting his orchestra at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

The first theme of *Slava!* is a vaudevillian razz-ma-tazz tune filled with side-slipping modulations and sliding trombones. Theme two, which prominently features electric guitar (soprano saxophone in tonight’s version), is a canonic tune in 7/8 (2+2+3) time. A very brief kind of development section follows, after which the two themes recur in reverse order. Near the end they are combined with a quotation (proclaimed by the ubiquitous trombones) from the “Coronation Scene” of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, wherein the chorus sings the Russian word, “slava!” meaning “glory!” In this way, of course, the composer pays an extra four-bar homage to his friend Slava Rostropovich, to whom the *Overture* is fondly dedicated.

Note by Jack Gottlieb

IRISH TUNE FROM COUNTY DERRY SHEPHERD’S HEY

Percy Aldridge Grainger

Percy Aldridge Grainger was born in Melbourne, Australia, on July 8, 1882. In 1900, he began his career as a concert pianist with sensational performances in England, Australia and South Africa. In 1906, his playing impressed composer Edvard Greig so much that Greig invited Grainger to his home in Norway. They spent the summer of 1907 preparing the premiere of Grieg’s *Piano Concerto*, conducted by the composer later that year in Leeds, England. Grieg died before the performance, but Grainger’s rendition established himself as one of the concerto’s great interpreters. During this time, Grainger also immersed himself in folk music. He traveled widely, recording folk singers with a wax-cylinder machine so he could transcribe accurately the singer’s rhythm, phrase and intonation. Grainger arrived in America in 1915, receiving further critical acclaim for his piano performances. At the outbreak of World War I, he enlisted as an Army bandsman (an oboist and saxophonist) and was soon transferred to the Army Music School. He became a United States citizen in 1919 and made many concert tours around the world both conducting and playing piano. Always the

innovator, Grainger pioneered in folk music collections at the same time as Bartok, used irregular rhythms before Stravinsky, and predated Varése in experimenting with electronic music.

Inspired by his love of folk music, Grainger orchestrated much of what he collected for the concert stage. Both *Irish Tune* and *Shepherd's Hey* Grainger "lovingly and reverently dedicated to the memory of Edvard Grieg."

Most people might recognize *Irish Tune from County Derry* as the tune "Danny Boy," although the melody is far older than the 20th century lyrics. Grainger noted, "This tune was collected by Miss J. Ross, of New Town, Limavady, Co. Derry, Ireland, and published in *The Petrie Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, Dublin, 1855." Grainger's first setting was for small military band, and later expanded for full band. The setting begins with the well-known melody in the brass and low woodwinds. During the second verse, the melody takes on a more pensive manner – employing a thinner scoring of soprano woodwinds in a higher tessitura. The full band enters on the latter half of the verse, concluding the setting with dynamic passion.

Shepherd's Hey was first composed for chamber ensemble in 1909, followed by versions for piano (1913), orchestra (1913), and wind band (1918), and is based upon the folk-dance tune of the same name. In 1918, Grainger commented about the dance, "In agricultural parts of England, teams of 'Morris Men,' decked out with jingling bells and other finery, can still be seen dancing to 'Shepherd's Hey' and other traditional dance tunes played on the fiddle or the pipe and tabor."

CONCERTO FOR ALTO SAXOPHONE

David Maslanka

The [complete] concerto turned out to be a good deal larger than I would reasonably want. As I got into the composing, the ideas became insistent: none of them would be left out! The format of Songs and Interludes arises from my other recent works for saxophones (*Mountain Roads* for saxophone quartet and *Song Book* for alto saxophone and marimba) and suggests a music that is more intimate than symphonic. There is a strong spiritual overtone with quotes from Bach Chorales, and from my own works *Hell's Gate* and *Mass*. A story is hinted at which has the Crucifixion right smack in the middle – the climax of the third movement quotes the "Crucifixus" from *Mass*. I don't know what the story is, only that it wants to be music, and not words.

I. Song: "Fire in the Earth"

Walking through a Montana field on a brilliant late fall day, three images came in rapid succession: a distant row of red plant stems caught by the morning sun, snow on the surrounding high mountains, green grass at my feet. The following poetic image came:

Fire in the earth
Snow in the heavens
New green grass in the middle of November

This is a quiet, emotional music – sometimes not so quiet – contained by a very simple song form.

Note by David Maslanka

ERIC VILLALTA, tonight's alto saxophone soloist, is a senior Music Education and Saxophone Performance major at the Crane School of Music who originally hails from Buffalo.

A student of Casey Grev, Eric has performed on a number of stages including the 2016 Navy Band Saxophone Symposium, 2018 Great Plains Saxophone Workshop, and the 2017 NASA Regional Conference. He has performed in masterclasses for Tim Roberts, Joe Lulloff, Jean-Michel Goury, and John Nichol.

In addition to his solo performances, Eric has also been a part of multiple chamber ensembles including the Cardinal Reed Quintet, Crane Faculty and Friends Chamber Ensemble, Crane Saxophone Ensemble, and a number of saxophone quartets.

Eric's most recent accomplishments include being selected to represent the woodwind area in the Crane Honors Recital, 2nd place with the Fratres Quartet in the Crane Chamber Music Competition, and 1st prize in the 2018 Crane Concerto Competition.

AMEN!

Carlos Simon

AMEN! was commissioned by the University of Michigan Symphony Band and is a homage to my family's four generational affiliation with the Pentecostal church. My intent is to re-create the musical experience of an African American Pentecostal church service that I enjoyed being a part of while growing up in this denomination.

Pentecostal denominations, such as: Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C.), Pentecostal Assemblies of God, Apostolic, Holiness Church, among many others, are known for their exuberant outward expressions of worship. The worship services in these churches will often have joyous dancing, spontaneous shouting, and soulful singing. The music in these worship services is a vital vehicle in fostering a genuine spiritual experience for the congregation.

The three movements in *AMEN!* are performed without break to depict how the different parts of a worship services flows into the next. In the first movement, I've imagined the sound of an exuberant choir and congregation singing harmoniously together in a call and response fashion. The soulful second movement quotes a gospel song, "I'll Take Jesus For Mine" that I frequently heard in many services. The title, *AMEN!*, refers to the plagal cadence or "Amen" cadence (IV-I), which is the focal point of the climax in the final movement. Along with heavily syncopated rhythms and interjecting contrapuntal lines, this cadence modulates up by half step until we reach a frenzied state, emulating a spiritually heightened state of worship.

Note by Carlos Simon