

Orchestra Toronto Concert Programme Notes

# Dances of the Americas

2023 February 26<sup>th</sup>

## *Landmarks of Note*

Programme Notes by Trevor Rines

**Listening Landmarks are in boldface**

Our concert takes us on a musical journey through the Western Hemisphere, dancing our way from North America to South America, then back again. Through the language of many dynamic dance styles, we travel from a bustling Canadian circus to Prohibition Era Alberta, from the quiet riverbanks of the Deep South to the lively dance halls of Mexico, & from South America's highest mountain peak to the rough streets of 1950s New York City.

The only piece on the concert which Orchestra Toronto has performed before is *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*. In addition to four orchestra premieres, there's also a World Premiere, which is always a wonderful way to begin a concert.

## *Circus March*

Composed by **Elizabeth Raum** (born 1945 in Halifax, Nova Scotia)

Orchestra Toronto's Composer-in-Residence [www.elizabethraum.com](http://www.elizabethraum.com)

This is a World Premiere Performance, commissioned by Orchestra Toronto

Running Time - about 7 minutes

You're the first people ever to hear this work. It's brand new, & has never been performed for an audience, before. As Composer-in-Residence, Elizabeth Raum is commissioned by Orchestra Toronto to write brand new pieces, which they get to premiere.

After a **brief fanfare**, to grandly announce that the circus is about to begin, the orchestra starts to **sound very much like a calliope**. That's a steam organ, the sound of which we tend to associate with circuses.

**We can hear each new act entering the ring**, one after the other. What do you hear? Are those acrobats tumbling or horses prancing? Perhaps it's lions or tigers roaring or the dancing bear, the graceful tightrope walker or the capering clowns. The emcee draws our attention to the centre ring, then high up, towards the top of the circus tent. Our eyes follow the spotlight, as **we hear the trapeze artists ascend**, climbing higher & higher, & **a sense of dramatic danger builds**.

When music has this sort of a story behind it, & is intended to convey specific mood & imagery, it's called programme music. This is as opposed to absolute music, where the composer may have a story or image in mind, but hasn't shared it with us.

This work is reminiscent of an old silent movie's live accompaniment to the onscreen antics of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton. In fact, Raum's working title for this work was initially *Musical Melodrama*. As the piece took shape, the different moods of the music kept calling to her mind visions of the sparkle of a circus & its many different groups of performers, so she changed the title to *Circus March*.

Raum's rousing fanfare, *Spirit of Canada*, closed last Season & this Season opened with her *Mirror Image*. Be sure to return for our next concert, on April 16<sup>th</sup>, when we'll finally hear the World Premiere of her much anticipated one act comic opera, also commissioned by Orchestra Toronto, *Romance of the Gods*.

## *Dances in the Canebrakes*

Composed by Florence Price (1887 Little Rock, Arkansas - 1953 Chicago, Illinois)

Premiere - 1998 in Flagstaff, Arizona

This is an Orchestra Toronto Premiere Performance

Running Time - about 9 minutes (all 3 movements)

*Nimble Feet - Tropical Noon - Silk Hat & Walking Cane*

*"To begin with I have two handicaps - those of sex & race. I am a woman; & I have some Negro blood in my veins. I would like to be judged on merit alone."* Florence Price wrote this in a 1943 letter to Boston Symphony conductor, Serge Koussevitzky. She likely felt that he was someone who might be inclined to help her, as he'd already boosted the careers of other up-&-coming composers, including Leonard Bernstein & Aaron Copeland. He didn't even reply.

Eleven years earlier, a breakthrough had led to the Chicago Symphony performing two of her works. She won both first & third prize, at the 1932 Wanamaker Foundation Awards. Their performance of her first prize winning *Symphony in E minor* was the first performance by a major orchestra of an African-American woman's composition. The following year, they performed her *Piano Concerto in D minor*, with Price as soloist.

Already a published composer at age 11, she also created orchestrations & jingles for radio, wrote popular songs under the alias Vee Jay, & accompanied silent movies. After her success with the Chicago Symphony, she continued to compose, writing three more symphonies, three more concertos, & hundreds of other works. Unfortunately, despite her efforts to promote them, most went unperformed.

*Dances in the Canebrakes* is one of her last compositions. Price wrote it as a suite of three piano pieces, just a few months before her death, in 1953. We're fortunate that, the very next year, African-American composer, William Grant Still, arranged it for orchestra. It was finally performed, 45 years later.

The first of three movements, *Nimble Feet*, is a **lilting & syncopated cakewalk**. Syncopation is where different instruments play contrasting rhythms, which disrupt the steady beat. A cakewalk is a high stepping partner dance, which began as plantation slaves mocking slaveholders' formal dances. **We hear the Latin influence** in *Tropical Noon*, the second movement, as Price paints a picture of a languid Caribbean town, basking in the midday heat. Still's arrangement uses **percussion to accentuate the Latin flavour** in Price's piano score. *Silk Hat & Walking Cane* is **a gently swaying, Scott Joplin style, ragtime**. Joplin's innovations built upon the cakewalk, to create a genre which he considered closer to classical music.

Before the Civil War, vast thickets of cane (bamboo-like giant grasses, which can grow to be over 7m tall), were common in the Deep South. Known as canebrakes, these thickets had to be cleared by slaves, to make way for the ever expanding cotton plantations, upon which the South grew rich.

A lucky discovery in 2009 created a resurgence of public interest in the music of Florence Price. Workers found three boxes, while renovating her old summer home. Hundreds of her works, thought to be lost, were rediscovered that day, including both of her *Violin Concertos* & her *Symphony No. 4*. As this wealth of recently recovered music is, at long last, being published & recorded, Price is finally receiving the recognition which she so richly deserves.

## *Bootlegger's Tarantella from Filumena*

Composed by **John Estacio** (born 1966 in Newmarket, Ontario) [www.johnestacio.com](http://www.johnestacio.com)

Premiere - 2001 in Calgary

This is an Orchestra Toronto Premiere Performance

Running Time - about 7 minutes

A bootlegger is a smuggler of alcohol over land (as opposed to a rum-runner, who smuggles it over water), to avoid taxation or because it's been banned.

A tarantella is a lively dance in 6/8 time. **Listen for the 123 123 pulse**. The dance originated in the town of Taranto, Italy, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was believed that the bite of the tarantula spider (likely a wolf spider) caused tarantism, an often fatal disease. Until the disease mysteriously disappeared, 200 years later, a victim's only cure was the frenzied dancing of the tarantella. Likely because of this grim origin, it's now considered unlucky to dance a tarantella alone, so it's usually danced by a man with one or two women. **We hear a nod to the tambourines, which women traditionally play, while flirting & dancing the tarantella.**

Before Canadian composer John Estacio even began to write his opera, *Filumena*, he wrote this work. It's like a short overture for the opera to come; however, not all of this work's musical themes ended up being included in the final opera, which premiered two years later.

Estacio's opera follows the life of the last woman executed in Alberta, Filumena Lassandro. When Prohibition arrived, in 1916, she joined an Italian bootlegging ring. Six years later, she was involved in a struggle with a bootlegger & the constable who had shot his son. The constable was killed, but public opinion was on her side. Despite appeals to the Prime Minister, Filumena was hanged. It was her excessively harsh sentence which turned the public against Prohibition, & led to it being repealed, less than a year later.

This work **opens with what sounds like a simple folk tune, followed by a boisterous party dance band, but listen closely.** At times, there's a slight feeling that the instruments are a bit blurred, or out of phase. **Some of the lower instruments (especially the low brass) move, albeit briefly, at a slightly different speed, before rejoining the orchestra's steady tempo.** This cleverly depicts the party band's drunkenness, due to the bootleggers' illicit booze. **We also hear a pair of trombones weaving their way through a short & lovely, very inebriated sounding, duet.** The orchestra **becomes quite serious & passionate in the second half,** as the tragedy of the story sinks in.

## *Danzón No. 2*

Composed by **Arturo Márquez** (born in 1950 Álamos, Mexico)

World Premiere - 1994 in Mexico City

This is an Orchestra Toronto Premiere Performance

Running Time - about 10 minutes

Since its triumphant World Premiere, just 29 years ago, *Danzón No. 2* has been hailed as Mexico's second National Anthem.

The composer said that this work *“endeavors to get as close as possible to the [danzón] dance, to its nostalgic melodies, to its wild rhythms, although it violates its intimacy, its form, & its harmonic language. It is a very personal way of paying my respects & expressing my emotions towards truly popular music.”*

The official dance of Cuba, the danzón is a slow & stately couples' dance, with elegant pauses. Evolving from the Cuban habanera dance, in the late 1800s, it's still very popular, especially in dance halls across Mexico. In fact, it was while visiting one of these dance halls, on a trip to Veracruz, that Arturo Márquez was inspired to compose his series of eight danzóns.

**Listen for two overlapping melodies, played by solo instruments. They interweave & complement one another, much like two dancers traversing the dance floor,** pulling apart, yet never fully separating, then being drawn back together.

As the work begins, we hear a **clarinet solo, accompanied gently by the piano, with the strings quietly plucking a pizzicato foundation. The claves** (a pair of wooden sticks, struck together) **establish a repeating, syncopated five-beat rhythm,** as is typical of Cuban dance

music. It's the bright, sharp click of the claves which sets the beat & is easily heard over large dance bands. Another percussionist plays a notched gourd called a guiro. Its **ratchetlike sound** is also frequently heard in Latin music.

**This melody is soon taken up by the oboe, then the clarinet joins back in, making it a graceful duet. Listen for the many short solos in this work (which often mingle as duets), by the piano, violin, double bass, piccolo, flute, French horn, & trumpet.**

This intimate & passionate dance, shared by a couple, becomes a very public encounter, when subjected to the full orchestral treatment. The danzón is traditionally slow & stately throughout. **While this work begins almost shyly, by a couple of minutes in, the orchestra is unexpectedly accelerating & quickly reaches quite a breakneck pace.**

**The syncopation & frequent solos give this work a lacelike texture.** At times frenetic & intense, it's also punctuated by light & airy, almost contemplative sections. It's as though the music keeps pausing to reconsider, before **swaggering to a boisterous & joyful conclusion.**

## *Bandoneón Concerto "Aconcagua"*

Composed by Astor Piazzolla (1921 Mar del Plata, Argentina - 1992 Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Bandoneón Soloist - Denis Plante (born in 1972 in Montréal, Québec)

World Premiere - 1979 in Buenos Aires

This is an Orchestra Toronto Premiere Performance

Running Time - about 23 minutes (all 3 movements)

*Allegro marcato - Moderato - Presto*

Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla led a revolution. He called his revolution Nuevo Tango (New Tango). And he used this equation to describe it:

*Nuevo Tango = Tango + Tragedy + Comedy + Kilombo (Whorehouse)*

Traditional tango is a couples' ballroom dance featuring abrupt pauses, long glides, & dramatic held poses. The accompanying music which accompanies this dance is in 2/4 time, & includes much **syncopation**.

In 1955, Piazzolla reinvented the tango, transforming it from the familiar dance, by **fusing it with elements of jazz & classical music**. He'd spend the rest of his life exploring the possibilities of his new genre, eventually adding electronic music & electric guitar to the mix.

Tragedy & Comedy are two sides of the same coin. Nuevo Tango is certainly tinged with the **regret & sadness** of a country wracked by dictatorships, but it's also blessed, in equal measure,

with the **sensuality & sense of humour** which are fundamental to tango. **Watch the bandoneón soloist, for these unexpected & sudden changes, through a wide emotional range.**

The name of the instrument may not be familiar to you, but you've definitely heard a bandoneón before, as it gives tango its distinctive sound. This smaller button accordion has no piano keyboard. More like a large concertina, it has only buttons, which makes it rather a fiendish instrument to play. The musician must remember the less than intuitive arrangement of its 71 buttons. Not only is the arrangement different for each hand, most (but not all) buttons play a different note, depending on whether the bellows are being pulled open or pushed closed.

German instrument maker, Heinrich Band, intended his new bandoneón for church services, as a portable organ. When it arrived in 1800s Argentina, with German immigrants, it found a new home, in the brothels. And so was established a provocative reputation, for it & the tango, charged with eroticism.

The bandoneón soloist plays tempo rubato (which means robbed time). **The orchestra plays steadily, but the soloist expressively pushes & pulls the rhythm, slowing down & speeding up, sometimes falling behind the orchestra & sometimes rushing ahead.**

**At the beginning, soloist & orchestra jump right in together, but watch for the conductor to stop conducting, while the soloist continues playing.** These are the **cadenzas** & the soloist is **improvising**. No two performances of this work will be quite the same. This element of improvisation is something which the composer adopted from the world of jazz. The nature of these solos are still very much rooted in the style of tango, though. **Also watch for the soloist cueing the conductor, to let him know when he's ready for the orchestra to jump back in.**

The three movements follow the classical form of fast, slow, fast. **In the slower second movement, we'll hear a lovely duet between the soloist & the harp.**

**About four minutes from the end, there's a lovely moment when the swelling orchestra pauses, for a surprising moment of silence. The piano begins a quiet melody & is joined by the bandoneón, for another gentle duet, with plucked strings quietly accompanying their graceful dance together.** This melody is actually from a previous work by Piazzolla, a tango called *El Flaco Aroldi*. This quiet interlude is followed by **the bandoneón introducing a repeated falling motif, which the orchestra, punctuated by the timpani, picks up & builds to a dramatic forte conclusion.**

Piazzolla himself performed the bandoneón solo, at the premiere. It was his publisher who added *Aconcagua* to this concerto's name, explaining, "*This is the peak of Astor's oeuvre, & the highest mountain peak in South America is Aconcagua.*" And this work has, indeed, come to be seen as the pinnacle of the composer's illustrious career.

## *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*

Composed by Leonard Bernstein (1918 Lawrence, Massachusetts - 1990 New York City)

World Premiere - 1961 in New York City

Last performed by Orchestra Toronto in 2013

Running Time - about 23 minutes

*Prologue - Somewhere - Scherzo - Mambo - Cha-Cha - Meeting Scene - 'Cool' Fugue - Rumble - Finale*

*"I don't feel happy that people will remember me because of West Side Story, even though I love the piece. I would rather people remembered me for my serious compositions."* Although composer Leonard Bernstein grew to resent the popularity of *West Side Story*, it's with good reason that this scintillating score continues to captivate audiences.

Bernstein & his cocreators, Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, & Stephen Sondheim, originally intended the musical to be called *East Side Story*. The conflict was to be between rival Jewish & Catholic groups. It wasn't until six years into the project that the version we know was suggested to them, by 1955's Los Angeles violence among teenaged Latin gangs.

And so, *West Side Story* was born. The conflict was now between Puerto Rican & white gangs, in New York's Upper West Side. When it stormed onto Broadway, two years later, it was a hit; however, audiences were shocked by how the musical unflinchingly addressed social issues of the time. *Romeo & Juliet* had been transformed into a plea for racial tolerance. As Bernstein said, *"Suddenly it all springs to life. I can hear the rhythms & pulses, & most of all, I can feel the form."* This is why the show is **infused with such wonderful elements of Latin American music, cleverly mixed in with the jazz, & even a Bach style 'Cool' fugue**, for good measure. The show's choreography & music is also **a blend of rhythms & flavours of many dance styles**, including ballet, jazz, flamenco, mambo, cha-cha, & habanera.

The theatre's pit orchestra was restricted to a limited number of musicians, with many playing multiple instruments. For instance, four woodwind players had to cover 13 instruments, between them. So, Bernstein was delighted when, in 1961, the opportunity arose to rework the score, using the resources & power of a full symphony orchestra. This meant that multiple percussion players could cover the dozens of different percussion instruments. The strings could be subdivided. There were now many more orchestral colours available to him. The theatrical score is brilliantly crafted, to sound like a bigger ensemble, but the *Symphonic Dances* are much richer & grander.

The nine music segments from the show, which Bernstein chose, are mostly from the dance scenes. You may notice that **they don't actually follow the order of the story**, as they must in the musical. Once freed from the plot, the music is arranged symphonically, in the order which makes the most sense musically, so that each idea flows directly into the next, without pause. This is why Bernstein called this work *Symphonic Dances*.

Since the actors are absent, **the score calls for the musicians to snap their fingers** (as do the gang members, dancing onstage). **A percussionist is even called upon to blow a police whistle**, at the end of the *Prologue*, right before *Somewhere*. And, of course, **the orchestra gets to yell “Mambo!”**

**After the *Rumble*, close to the end, listen for a flute solo.** This is unique to these *Symphonic Dances*. While the rest of the music is from the musical, this solo doesn't exist in the score of the show.

Our concert draws to a close with a leitmotif meant to depict togetherness, woven with the theme from *Somewhere*. All instruments rise slowly higher, gradually growing quieter. The final three bars are heartbreaking, as they float, ambiguously, haunted with regret, tinged with hope - especially when one remembers the bittersweet lyrics which accompany them: “*Somehow. Someday. Somewhere.*”