

Saturday, July 9, 8pm
BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
ANDRIS NELSONS conducting

Carlos SIMON	<i>Motherboxx Connection (2021)</i>
BARBER	<i>Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Opus 24,</i> for soprano and orchestra Text by James Agee NICOLE CABELL, soprano {Intermission}
ELLINGTON	<i>New World A-Coming, for piano and orchestra</i> AARON DIEHL, piano
GERSHWIN	<i>An American in Paris</i>

Notes on the program

Carlos Simon (b.1986) *Motherboxx Connection (2021)*

Composition and premiere: Carlos Simon wrote *Motherboxx Connection* originally as the first part of his four-movement *Tales: A Folklore Symphony*, a work commissioned by the Sphinx Organization for its 25th anniversary and by the University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra, which gave the premiere January 26, 2022, in Ann Arbor, Kenneth Kiesler conducting. The present version of *Motherboxx* was revised as a standalone work; tonight's is the first performance of this version of the piece.

For all the eclectic variety of Carlos Simon's musical career, each one of his musical activities—teaching, arranging, performing as a keyboardist—is centered on composing: “The way I think about things, I’m a composer first,” he says. Currently composer in residence of the Kennedy Center in Washington, he was music director and keyboardist for Broadway star Jennifer Holliday (including performances with the Boston Pops and Keith Lockhart) and has toured with the singer and hip-hop pioneer Angela Stone. Simon was a Fellow of Sundance Institute in 2018. In 2020 he became an assistant professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where his courses include music theory and the study of sound and music for film.

Simon was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up in Atlanta, where his father was a pastor. He learned to play piano by ear at his parents' urging to provide music for services. Black Gospel music was the core of his musical experience. Simon's introduction to classical music came through movies and through his grandmother's enthusiasm; when he was about 10, she bought him a “masterpieces of classical music” CD that included the famous second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. By high school Simon took for granted he would be a classical pianist and composer. He studied piano and composition at Georgia State University and Morehouse College before earning his doctorate in composition from the University of Michigan, where his teachers included Michael Daugherty and Evan Chambers.

Simon's willingness to explore all the tools at his disposal also began in high school with making electronic music and sounds via computer. It was only later that he realized how useful such “commercial” tools and sounds could be in his own music, especially in such genre-stacking projects as his 2018 concept album *My Ancestor's Gift*, which blends his pop, gospel, classical, and experimental experiences into a rich musical narrative. He has written for Washington National Opera, the Reno Philharmonic, American Composers Orchestra, the University of Michigan Symphony Band, and many others. He received the Sphinx Medal of Excellence from the Sphinx Organization, which nurtures and develops the careers of Black and Latino classical musicians. The Boston Symphony Orchestra and Andris Nelsons performed his *Fate Now Conquers* in the 2020-21 season and at Tanglewood last year and commissioned a new orchestral work, scheduled for premiere under Nelsons' direction in February 2023 at Symphony Hall, Boston.

The title of Simon's *Tales: A Folklore Symphony*, of which *Motherboxx Connection* is the opening movement, suggests ties to such earlier African American composers as William Dawson (e.g., his *Negro Folk Symphony*) and William Grant Still. Simon's sense of folklore is more far-reaching, incorporating contemporary popular culture as well as traditional folk references ("Go Down Moses," "John Henry," and a legend of Flying Africans). The composer writes of *Motherboxx Connection*,

"Where are all the black people in comics?" This is a question posed by the creative duo Black Kirby (John Jennings and Stacey Robinson). Based heavily in Afrofuturism, Black Kirby's characters show black people as heroes using ancient customs and futurist motifs from the African and African American diaspora. This piece is inspired by the many heroic characters found in the work of Black Kirby, but mainly *Motherboxx Connection* (*Black Kirby: In Search of the Motherboxx Connection*).

According to scholar Regina N. Bradley, *Motherboxx Connection* is "a pun on Jack Kirby's motherbox, a living computer connected to the world, the Motherboxx too is a living computer with a heightened awareness of racial and sexual discourses surrounding the black body. The motherboxx is the technological equivalent of the "mother land" in the black diaspora imagination. She is where black identities merge and depart."

To represent the power and intelligence of the motherboxx, I have composed a short fast moving musical idea that constantly weaves in and throughout the orchestra. A majestic, fanfare-like figure also provides the overall mood of strength and heroism. I imagine the motherboxx as an all-knowing entity that is aware of the multi-faceted aspects of blackness

—Carlos Simon

Black Kirby references the work of the comic book creator Jack Kirby, credited with developing the hero the Black Panther. *Motherboxx Connection*, then, joins a vital (post)modernist "folk" or popular aesthetic tradition: the vibrant cultural movement of Afrofuturism visual art, literature, film, music, fashion, dance—anywhere Black artists and thinkers are making their mark. Simon joins the ranks of such creators as novelists Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delaney, visual artists Nick Cave and Cauleen Smith, funk maven George Clinton and jazz pioneer Sun Ra....

ROBERT KIRZINGER

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Opus 24

Composition and premiere: The manuscript score of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* bears the date April 4, 1947. The soprano Eleanor Steber, who commissioned the work, gave the premiere in Boston on April 9 and 10, 1948, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra led by Serge Koussevitzky. The first Tanglewood performance took place on August 18, 1984, with Edith Wiens and the BSO under Michael Tilson Thomas; Renée Fleming sang the most recent Tanglewood performance with the BSO under William Eddins on July 5, 2014. The score is dedicated, "In Memory of my Father."

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 is one of the bona fide classics of American music (not quite attaining the status of the composer's universally beloved Adagio for Strings). The soprano Eleanor Steber retroactively commissioned the work; her involvement was the result of Barber's relationship with Koussevitzky and the BSO, which had already performed the composer's *School for Scandal* Overture, the Violin Concerto, the first *Essay for Orchestra*, and the premiere of his Second Symphony, *Airborne*. Barber had no particular prospects for *Knoxville* when he sent Koussevitzky the score in 1947, but the conductor was delighted, suggesting Barber send it to Steber. An acclaimed American soprano who had made her Metropolitan Opera debut in 1940, Steber had sung with Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops in 1938 and as soprano soloist in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony under Koussevitzky. She would later create the title role in Barber's opera *Vanessa* at the Met in 1958.

The text of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is taken from James Agee's autobiographical essay "Knoxville, 1915," used as the introduction to his novel *A Death in the Family*. The point of view (but not the nostalgic, poeticized language) is that of the 6-year-old Agee, whose innocent understanding is variously comfortable, excited, and emotionally intense. Barber sets the straightforward but image-rich prose in several episodes. The outer sections focus on Agee's

family and home, at first descriptive, then examining. Barber sets the descriptive sections with lilting, three-beat melodies. The opening tune, which returns throughout the piece, uses the common pentatonic scale for a strong, clear, folk-like quality. This moves almost without transition to an overstimulated episode describing Knoxville's bustling evening activity, centered on the streetcar. We return to the front porch and the opening tune, which broadens out into a major-key musing on the narrator's family. The child is overcome with emotion: "May God bless my people." After the child's final brief crisis of identity, the opening melody returns in the oboe as a kind of ultimate comfort.

ROBERT KIRZINGER

KNOXVILLE: SUMMER OF 1915

We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville Tennessee in that time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.

...It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars. People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber.

A streetcar raising its iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts; the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter, fainting, lifting, lifts, faints foregone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose. Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes.... Parents on porches: rock and rock. From damp strings morning glories hang their ancient faces. The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums.

On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there....They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine,...with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night. May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away.

After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.

—James Agee

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Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899-1974)

New World A-Coming, for piano and orchestra (arr. Maurice Peress)

Composition and premiere: Ellington wrote the "tone parallel" *New World A-Coming* in 1943 and premiered it on December 11 of that year at Carnegie Hall. In 1983, on commission from Ellington's son Mercer, the conductor Maurice Peress created a score from the 1943 Carnegie Hall recording of *New World A-Coming*. Peress also created the present version for symphony orchestra. This is the first Tanglewood performance.

Duke Ellington had already begun to push the structural and expressive limitations of blues and song by the end of the 1920s, when his orchestra was the house band of New York City's exclusive Cotton Club. The club's all-white patronage expected not only dance numbers but also music to fill an entire evening: transitional numbers, theatrical revues, overtures, and illustrative effects such as the evocative faux-African "jungle style" that Ellington, in the U.S. anyway, helped invent. Along with such songlike hits as *Mood Indigo* were more extended numbers, including the seven-minute, multipart *Creole Rhapsody* (1931) and *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* (1937), made possible by Ellington's exploratory harmonic language and the flexibility and creativity of his players, who included the great saxophonist Johnny Hodges and later the composer, arranger, and pianist Billy Strayhorn. The band toured the U.S. and Europe, capitalizing on the worldwide fame of their recordings.

Returning from a two-year working sojourn in California and seeking to reclaim his New York City reputation, Ellington followed his agent's advice and booked a benefit concert for the Russian war relief effort in Carnegie Hall for January 23, 1943. Ellington premiered one of his most ambitious works at that concert—the forty-five minute, three-part orchestral suite *Black, Brown, and Beige*. The successful performance led to further engagements at Carnegie Hall and several other long-form pieces that Ellington wrote for these concerts. *New World A-Coming*, a single-movement work for piano and ensemble, was among them.

New World A-Coming takes its title from a 1943 social history of Harlem by the prominent journalist Roi Ottley: *New Day A-Coming: Inside Black America*. Ellington was a voracious student of the African American experience, depictions of which laid the foundations for his large-scale works. Ellington categorized many of these as "tone parallels," a phrase analogous to the more broadly used music history terms "symphonic poem" and "tone poem" designating works by, for example, Strauss or Sibelius. In Ellington's conception, the musical experience he creates "parallels" the real-world phenomenon he set out to illustrate. In the case of *New World A-Coming* that phenomenon is everyday life in Harlem in the 1940s.

New World A-Coming is a single movement in several sections, each of which starts with a theme or mood proposed by the piano soloist. The solo part includes repetitive left-hand chordal textures, sparkling, quasi-improvised runs and scales, and full, thick chromatic chords that have their roots in Ellington's own playing style. The rapidly shifting musical and expressive ideas in the piece reflect the vibrancy and variety of Harlem, from dancing exuberance to soulful melancholy and poignant spirituality. On occasion, Ellington also performed *New World A-Coming* as a piano solo without accompaniment.

ROBERT KIRZINGER

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

An American in Paris

Composition and premiere: Gershwin spent much of 1928 composing and orchestrating the tone poem *An American in Paris*, which he began during a three-month trip to Europe that year and completed in November. Walter Damrosch premiered the piece on December 13, 1928, with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Society. The Boston Pops began playing the piece regularly in 1929 with performances under Alfredo Casella, but the first BSO performance came much later, on August 9, 1974, at Tanglewood with Arthur Fiedler conducting. Stéphane Denève led the BSO in the most recent complete Tanglewood performance on August 6, 2013, for Tanglewood on Parade.

George Gershwin won public acclaim in the early 1920s for his songs and musical comedies, and in 1924 for his *Rhapsody in Blue*. He collaborated with his brother-lyricist, Ira Gershwin, on a series of successful Broadway and Hollywood musical comedies, and also wrote a few concert works, including the Piano Concerto in F (1925), the tone poem *An American in Paris* (1928), and the Second Rhapsody for orchestra with piano, which he premiered with Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra on January 29, 1932. His career peaked with the opera *Porgy and Bess*, which had its world premiere on September 30, 1935, at Boston's Colonial Theater before moving to Broadway. Gershwin died of a brain tumor in 1937 at age 38, while working in Hollywood on the film musical *The Goldwyn Follies*.

It was in April 1926, after spending a week in Paris, that Gershwin sent his hosts a thank-you postcard with a musical fragment marked "Very Parisienne" and labeled "An American in Paris." As he set out in early 1928 to write an orchestral piece—his third large concert work, and his first without a solo piano part for himself—he returned to this motif, but was not sure of how to develop the music. However, as he pondered his attachment to the

Hudson River from his home on West 103rd Street in Manhattan, he had a flash of inspiration: “an American in Paris, homesickness, the blues.”

Gershwin wrote a short narrative description of the piece in 1934:

This piece describes an American’s visit to the gay and beautiful city of Paris. We see him sauntering down the Champs Elysées, walking stick in hand, tilted straw hat, drinking in the sights, and other things as well. We see the effect of the French wine, which makes him homesick for America....He finally emerges from his stupor to realize once again that he is in the gay city of Paree, listening to the taxi-horns, the noise of the boulevards, and the music of the can-can, and thinking, “Home is swell! But after all, this is Paris—so let’s go!”

The work consists of five sections, each with its own themes which, once stated, reappear through the piece, often ingeniously juxtaposed with one another. The first two sections portray the “sauntering” American; the next two depict his “blues,” and the final section, his cheerful resignation. For extra local color, the first section quotes a popular *maxixe* from 1905 (presumably the “can-can” music) known by various names and popularly parodied in the States as “My ma gave me a nickel, to buy a pickle.” Gershwin scored the piece for large orchestra, featuring a contingent of three saxophones and an extensive percussion battery, including four taxi horns.

HOWARD POLLACK

Howard Pollack is John and Rebecca Moores Professor of Music at the University of Houston and the author of *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man*, and *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World*, among others.