

## **Reno Chamber Orchestra**

Latin Bridges

April 5 & 6, 2025

Nightingale Concert Hall

Program Notes by Chris Morrison

### **George Gershwin**

*Born: September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, New York*

*Died: July 11, 1937, Los Angeles, California*

George Gershwin is one of the most beloved American composers of the twentieth century. His songs, orchestral music, Broadway shows, and his most ambitious work, the “folk opera” *Porgy and Bess* (1935), effectively bring together the worlds of classical music, jazz, and popular music – musical realms that Gershwin never felt were mutually exclusive. Gershwin studied piano as a teenager and worked as a song plugger, performing pop songs in public places to help sell sheet music. The first of his own compositions to become a huge hit was the song “Swanee,” written when he was 21 and popularized by Al Jolson. He had several further successes with his own songs and on Broadway, including shows like *Funny Face* (1927), *Strike Up The Band* (1929), *Girl Crazy* (1930), and *Of Thee I Sing!* (1931), the first musical comedy to win the Pulitzer Prize. In 1924, Gershwin composed his first major classical work, *Rhapsody in Blue*; it and *An American in Paris* (1928) have remained staples of the classical repertoire. In 1935, Gershwin moved to Hollywood, composing film scores until his death from a malignant brain tumor.

### **Cuban Overture**

*Composed: 1932*

*Duration: 10 minutes*

The always-busy Gershwin had concluded work on his most recent Broadway show, *Of Thee I Sing*, as well as his first film score, for the musical comedy *Delicious*, when he took a short vacation in Havana in February 1932, “two hysterical weeks,” he wrote, “where no sleep was had., but the quality and quantity of fun made up for that.” Along with the many parties he attended, Gershwin found himself particularly taken with Cuban music, especially “its small dance orchestras, who play [the] most intricate rhythms most naturally.”

In July and August of that year, Gershwin wrote a new work, originally titled *Rumba*, with the thought of making American audiences more familiar with Cuba's music. The new work was premiered at an all-Gershwin concert by the New York Philharmonic, led by Albert Coates, on August 16, 1932. As Gershwin subsequently wrote, “It was, I really believe, the most

exciting night I have ever had ... 17,845 people paid to get in and just about 5,000 were at the closed gates trying to fight their way in – unsuccessfully.” Gershwin gave his *Rumba* a new name, *Cuban Overture*, a few months later.

Rhythms of Cuban and Caribbean dances abound in the work. Tunes from the region play a prominent role as well, including what was at the time something of a hit, “Échale Salsita” by the Ignacio Piñero Septet, whom Gershwin got a chance to hear in a live radio performance while he was in Havana. To provide some extra authenticity, Gershwin purchased several percussion instruments in Cuba for incorporation into his new piece. A note with a sketch from Gershwin in the score suggests placing that percussion – including maracas, bongo, claves, and guiro (gourd) – “right in front of the conductor's stand.”

The overture is in three-part, or ABA, form. Gershwin elaborates: “In my composition I have endeavored to combine the Cuban rhythms with my own thematic material. The result is a symphonic overture which embodies the essence of the Cuban dance. It has three parts: the first part (Moderato e Molto Ritmato) is preceded by a (forte) introduction featuring some of the thematic material. Then comes a three-part contrapuntal episode leading to a second theme. The first part finishes with a recurrence of the first theme combined with fragments of the second. A solo clarinet cadenza leads to a middle part, which is in a plaintive mood. It is a gradually developing canon in a polytonal manner. This part concludes with a climax based on an ostinato of the theme in the canon, after which a sudden change in tempo brings us back to the rumba dance rhythms. The finale is a development of the preceding material in a stretto-like manner. This leads us back once again to the main theme. The work concludes with a coda that features the Cuban percussion instruments.”

## **Astor Piazzolla**

*Born: March 11, 1921, Mar Del Plata, Argentina*

*Died: July 5, 1992, Buenos Aires, Argentina*

Astor Piazzolla was almost single-handedly responsible for taking what was once a regional folk dance, the tango, and making it famous all over the world. Piazzolla’s family moved to New York when he was three. He grew up listening to his father’s tango records, while also encountering the city’s wide range of jazz and classical music. At eight he received his first bandoneon, the large button accordion on which he became a virtuoso. After his family returned to Argentina in 1936, Piazzolla found employment in a dance orchestra while continuing his classical studies. Eventually he won a scholarship that allowed him to study in Paris with famous pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. He took to heart her advice to use his classical and jazz training to revitalize the tango, creating what came to be known as “nuevo tango.” Although his early efforts won the scorn of traditionalists, he continued to experiment, forming groups with which he recorded and performed all over the world, working with jazz musicians like Gerry Mulligan and Gary Burton, and composing for

orchestras and film. As his international fame grew in the 1980s, he continued to concertize and wrote for musicians like Mstislav Rostropovich and the Kronos Quartet.

## ***Sinfonietta***

*Composed: 1953*

*Duration: 15 minutes*

From his teens, Piazzolla was performing in tango orchestras. He formed his own first band in 1946, enabling him to compose his own works and experiment with the tango form. But his ambitions looked beyond the tango, and in 1950 he disbanded his orchestra, temporarily stopped playing the bandoneon, and started studying the music of Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók. His compositions of that time, the early 1950s, reflected this quest for a new style that combined tango and classical music.

1953 was a pivotal year for him. Urged on by his teacher and mentor Alberto Ginastera, in August 1953 Piazzolla entered his *Buenos Aires Symphony in Three Movements* in a competition for the Fabian Sevitzky Award. While feelings about the work were, to put it mildly, mixed when it was performed in Buenos Aires – apparently a fight broke out among audience members over whether or not Piazzolla's inclusion of two bandoneons in the orchestra was appropriate – the composition won the composer the grant that allowed him to travel to France and study with Nadia Boulanger.

That same year of 1953, Piazzolla composed his *Sinfonietta* for chamber orchestra, a work that exemplifies his search for a way to combine tango rhythms with classical style and forms. A piano figure opens the first movement, "Dramatico," repeating as an ostinato as a tango-influenced melody is sounded. Dramatic outbursts from the timpani and other tuned percussion punctuate the syncopated, and sinuous, main melody. Rhythmic drive characterizes the entire movement. Many have heard here the influence of the music of Piazzolla's mentor Ginastera.

The second movement, "Sobrio," opens with an angular melody from the bassoon. Low strings and clarinet join in as the melody spins out. Intensity builds as the other instruments join in, including prominent timpani. Woodwinds trade brief solos over hushed strings. Rhythmic drive returns in the third movement, "Jubiloso," its tango rhythms and syncopations mixed with decorative wind solos and duos, maintaining intensity through the work's exciting conclusion.

## **George Frideric Handel**

*Born: February 23, 1685, Halle, Germany*

*Died: April 14, 1759, London, England*

George Frideric Handel is one of the most beloved composers of music's Baroque era. Born Georg Friedrich Händel in Halle, Germany, Handel held early posts as church organist and violinist before moving to Italy to learn about Italian opera at first hand. He had his first successes as a composer there and attracted the attention of the Elector of Hanover, who brought him back to Germany as his court composer. When the Elector became King George I of England in 1714, Handel followed him to England. The Italian operas Handel subsequently wrote for the London stage made him famous, and when the audiences for those operas diminished by the early 1740s, Handel won even greater fame composing religious oratorios like *Messiah* (the source of the ever-popular "Hallelujah" Chorus), *Israel in Egypt*, and *Judas Maccabeus*. Decades after Handel's death, Ludwig van Beethoven, who thought Handel the greatest of all composers, said of him "I would bare my head and kneel at his grave."

### **Excerpts from *Messiah***

*Composed: 1741*

*Duration: 48 minutes*

Handel moved permanently to London in 1712, becoming a naturalized British subject in 1727. As early as 1711, Handel had made a name for himself in England with his Italian-language operas, eventually producing over forty such operas for London theaters. But by the early 1730s, enthusiasm for those Italian works was starting to fade, partly due to the great popularity of English-language "ballad operas" like *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) by John Gay and Johann Christoph Pepusch. Handel nearly bankrupted himself funding his own operatic productions when ticket sales and donations from the nobility dried up.

Handel started to turn his attention to English-language oratorios, which, unlike operas with their secular subject matter, were based on Biblical stories. The Bishop of London had forbidden performances of religious works on London stages, so Handel wrote for concert, non-staged performance in a church. The successes of his oratorios *Esther*, *Deborah*, *Athalia*, and *Saul* in the 1730s bolstered his confidence.

*Saul* featured a libretto by Charles Jennens, a wealthy landowner who also had a great interest in music and literature. Jennens, who provided funding for many of Handel's Italian operas, was also a personal friend of the composer's. In 1741, Jennens sent Handel another libretto. He wrote of it to his friend Edward Holdsworth, "I hope [Handel] will lay out his whole Genius & Skill upon it, that the Composition may excell all his former Compositions, as the Subject excells every other subject. The Subject is *Messiah*."

Jennens fashioned a three-part libretto for *Messiah*, using texts from the *King James Bible* and the *Coverdale Psalter*, part of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*. Part I begins with

God's promises, relayed by the prophets, of a savior, and moves to Christ's birth as described in the Gospel According to Luke. Part II deals with Christ's passion and death, ending with his resurrection and glorification in Heaven. Then Part III focuses on the promise of universal redemption and eternal life, the day of judgment, the final victory over sin and death, and the acclamation of Christ. Each part features an assortment of recitatives, arias, and choruses. But the work is less a narrative than a meditation on aspects of the Christian Messiah.

Handel completed the music for *Messiah* in a mere 24 days, in August and September of 1741, although he did continue to rework certain sections in later years for specific performances. While he was always a fast worker, *Messiah* seems to have provided him with extra inspiration. It is said that, while Handel was writing the oratorio's most famous section, the "Hallelujah" Chorus, his servant found him with tears in his eyes, exclaiming, "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself seated on His throne, with His company of Angels."

Handel had been asked by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to present a season of concerts in Dublin in late 1741 and early 1742. The concerts would take place in the new Great Music Hall on Fishamble Street in Dublin, which had just been built. As a benefit for The Charitable and Musical Society for the Release of Imprisoned Debtors, the Mercer's Hospital, and the Charitable Infirmary, Handel led the premiere of *Messiah* on April 13, 1742. It was enormously successful, and another performance took place on June 3. Subsequent performances in London, however, were not so well-received – not until 1750, at least, which saw the beginning of annual performances of *Messiah* at London's Foundling Hospital, a home for abandoned and orphaned children and Handel's favorite charity, which continued through Handel's lifetime and beyond.

While *Messiah*, still probably Handel's most popular work, is often heard around Christmas time, much of the work is actually more appropriate for a presentation around Easter. This concert focuses on those Easter-appropriate sections from Parts II and III. They are heard in the form of *El Mesías: Handel's Messiah for a New World*, originally commissioned by the Bach Collegium San Diego, which combines Handel's music with a new Spanish-language translation of the libretto by Mario Montenegro.

After two opening sections, Part II continues with a series of short choral pieces that focus on Christ's Passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection, including the dramatic and plaintive chorus "Así fue, lo hicimos sufrir" (Surely, He hath borne our griefs) and the peaceful, but still minor key, "Y en su dolor sanamos" (And with His stripes we are healed). A short recitative by the tenor soloist, "Los que lo miran se ríen de él" (All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn), leads into the militant counterpoint of the chorus's "Él piensa que Dios vendrá a liberarlo" (He trusted in God that He would deliver Him).

Another short recitative, "Se le negó permanecer en su tierra" (He was cut off out of the land of the living), leads into the stately soprano aria "Mas no dejarás su alma sufrir" (But Thou didst not leave his soul in hell), in which the tone starts to change from somber to more affirmative. This change comes to fruition in the chorus "Puertas abrid" (Lift up your heads, O ye gates), in which Handel initially divides the chorus into two sections, with the altos serving both as the bass line to the sopranos and the upper line for the tenors and basses.

Handel's music for the aria "Por qué los pueblos furiosos van conspirando" (Why do the nations so furiously rage together) is itself stormy and furious, almost in the manner of an operatic aria. The short recitative "El que mora en los cielos" (He that dwelleth in heaven) is followed by another rather dramatic aria, the tenor's "Destrozados con puño de hierro" (Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron), with its florid display and wide melodic leaps.

Part II of *Messiah* concludes with the famous "Aleluya" (Hallelujah). The "Hallelujah" Chorus, among the most recognizable pieces of music ever written, builds from its relatively light opening to the bold unison on the words "Dios el Señor omnipotente reina" (For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth) and the dramatic trumpets of "Y reinará ahora y por siempre" (And He shall reign for ever and ever). A tradition, still sometimes observed today, has the audience stand for this music. Although there is no actual evidence to back this up, it is said that at the 1743 premiere of *Messiah* in London, King George II, perhaps moved by the music, stood at this point in the work. It was considered good etiquette to stand when the King stood, hence the tradition.

Part III of *Messiah* begins with the soprano aria "Yo sé que mi Redentor vive" (I know that my Redeemer liveth). The simplicity of the music, with its peaceful rhythm and accompaniment from the violins, makes it one of the most moving sections of the oratorio. The quiet, mysterious music of the chorus "Por Adán morimos" (Since by man came death) is interrupted twice by more dramatic outbursts. The accompanied recitative "Oid, os digo un misterio" (Behold, I tell you a mystery) introduces one of the longest segments of *Messiah*, the bold aria for the baritone "Trompeta, anunciad" (The trumpet shall sound), Marked "pomposo ma non allegro" (dignified but not fast), the aria features prominent contributions from the solo trumpet, the only significant instrumental solo in the oratorio.

The oratorio's final section, "Gloria al Cordero de Dios... Amen" (Worthy is the Lamb ... Amen), begins majestically, with some of the grandeur of the "Hallelujah" Chorus. The polyphonic textures heard here continue into the concluding "Amen," which begins peacefully enough but soon builds powerfully, in music where, in the words of conductor Christopher Hogwood, "the entry of the trumpets marks the final storming of heaven."

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