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2024-25



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Chamber Orchestra

A Fable and Two Symphonies

Renee Gilliland, conductor

Nathan Mertens, soprano saxophone

Javier Abreu, narrator

7:30 p.m., Thursday, Oct. 24, 2024

Grusin Music Hall

PROGRAM

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 11

Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799)

I. Allegro presto

II. Andante

III. Presto

Dancing Fish

Cecilia McDowall (b. 1951)

Nathan Mertens, soprano saxophone

Javier Abreu, narrator

Intermission

Symphony No. 2 in A minor, Op. 55

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

I. Allegro marcato

II. Adagio

III. Scherzo presto

IV. Prestissimo

PROGRAM NOTES

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 11

Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745-1799)

A pioneer, polymath, and one of the most remarkable figures of the 18th century, Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges's career trajectory spanned humble beginnings on a plantation in Guadelupe to regularly performing in duet with Marie Antoinette, Queen of France. An accomplished swordsman, swimmer, dancer, composer and violinist, Saint-Georges attained stature and influence such as had been never achieved by a musician of African descent. Even when faced with prejudice and career setbacks, his compositions demonstrate a refinement of style and substance that made his success in French court circles all the more evident.

Born in the then-French colony of Guadeloupe to a wealthy, married plantation owner and his wife's 16-year-old maid of Senegalese descent, Saint-Georges was taken to France at the age of 7 to begin his education. Enrolled in a prestigious fencing school at 13, he swiftly made a name for himself as one of the most gifted swordsmen in the country, besting several prominent masters of the discipline. Upon his graduation from the Royal Polytechnique Academy, Bologne became a Gendarme du roi (officer of the king's bodyguard) and a chevalier. He also formally adopted his father's suffix, becoming known as the Chevalier de Saint-Georges from this point onward.

Although gaining national attention through his fencing skills, Saint-George's passions lay in the musical arena. He was already an accomplished violinist by the time he received instruction from the highly-regarded composer François-Joseph Gossec, founder of the highly-regarded orchestra Le Concert des Amateurs, and became the ensemble's concertmaster and conductor a short time later. Contemporary accounts testify to the sensation his performances generated, with praise heaped

on his instrumental dexterity, deft command of the orchestra and well-balanced, pleasing compositions. Although a favorite in salons throughout the French capital, Saint-Georges found his career ambitions thwarted when it came time to name the new director of the Paris Opéra. With his skill on full display at nearly every performance stage, Saint-Georges was the clear choice to extricate the opera from its financial woes and return it to artistic eminence. However, the position was not to be his—machinations behind the scenes culminated in three of the opera’s leading singers petitioning the Queen [Marie Antoinette] to deny the composer the post, insisting that their “honor and delicate conscience could never allow them to submit to the orders of a [person of color].”

The three movements of Saint-Georges’s Symphony No. 2 comprises a re-formulation of the overture to the composer’s opera *L’Amant Anonyme* (“The Anonymous Lover”). Central are two stylistic themes; one of the brilliant, sprightly instrument style cultivated by the Mannheim School of symphonists, and the other the tuneful, voice-like melodic invention found in arias and other operatic writing of the era. Scored for modest orchestra forces (strings, oboes and horns), the symphony opens with energetic fanfares that map out the movement’s tonal center. Contrasting these by-now-established initial structures are graceful passages for strings that trip about daintily and offer a respite from the brash utterances that continuously reappear.

The *Andante* movement opens with scenes from a measured, stately minuet in 3/4 time; the signature dance of European nobility in the mid-18th century. Saint-Georges adds a degree of complexity by opting for his supporting string forces to enter in sequence, an effect that resembles the canonic writing of the baroque masters. Torrid, driving momentum characterizes the writing of the finale; here, Saint-Georges utilizes devices that would become a recognizable feature of the later classicists, namely Mozart and Salieri; upper strings outlining suspended closing cadences while lower strings rush upwards in driving, insistent passages.

A respected, well-liked contemporary of Mozart, Haydn, Gassman and fellow composers that were crafting the classical style of composition, Saint-Georges's accomplishments confronted what was understood to be possible for a person of African descent. Living and working under the restrictions of France's Code Noir decree first passed by King Louis XIV in 1685, Saint-Georges' influence broke new ground and drew the admiration of many. Called the "Black Mozart" even in his day, it is revealing to recognize that it was the younger Austrian composer who visited Paris in the hopes of watching and learning from Saint-Georges in action.

—Program note by Kemper Edwards

Dancing Fish

Cecilia McDowall (b. 1951)

This work (originally written for soprano saxophone and string quartet) was inspired by "Dancing Fish," a Russian fable written by Ivan Krylov. Krylov worked in government before abandoning his position in 1807 to devote himself exclusively to a literary career. His famous *Fables*, published in 1809, were immediately successful. His tales expose human weaknesses, particularly those which are typically Russian, and are directed against injustice and corruption, rife in the government and professions of the time.

Dancing Fish tells of fish, contentedly getting on with their fishy lives in the river. The Fox is elected by the Lion, the king of all beasts, to oversee the Fish as their governor. However, the waters grow dark as the Fox indulges in a fishy meal or two. The Lion, passing by one day, sees that the Fox has grown fatter and he asks why the fish "wag their tails and heads that way?" The Fox cunningly replies that the fish are dancing with joy at the sight of seeing the Lion. Clever words. The Lion, suspecting the Fox is up to no good, forces the Fox to pay for his corrupt behaviour; but too late, for the fish are having their last dance—and this time, in the frying pan.

A fragment of a Russian folk song is first heard on the saxophone in the opening section and makes further melancholic appearances as the piece progresses, moving from aquatic tranquility to the somewhat frantic dancing of the concluding section.

Dancing Fish was commissioned by Sarah Field with funds provided by David Bowerman. The first performance was given by Sarah Field (soprano saxophone) with the Bronte String Quartet in the Purcell Room, South Bank, London, 2004. The concert was presented by The Concordia Foundation. The first London performance of the string orchestra version of *Dancing Fish* was given by Amy Dickson, saxophone, with Orchestra Nova conducted by George Vass at St. John's, Smith Square, London on Oct. 9, 2011. *Dancing Fish* has been recorded and is available on the Dutton Epoch label (CDLX 7159).

—Program note by Cecilia McDowall

Symphony No. 2 in A minor, Op. 55

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Camille Saint-Saëns was 24 years old when, during the summer of 1859, he composed Symphony No. 2 in A minor. It is a work which is both youthful and convention-defying. Intimate and compact, this music is far removed from the monumental grandeur of the “Organ Symphony,” which Saint-Saëns wrote some 30 years later. It bends symphonic form in surprising and adventurous ways.

The first movement (*Allegro marcato – Allegro appassionato*) begins with a stern “call to order” in the form of two thunderous chords, which open the door to a strange falling and rising motif. Moments later, individual instrumental voices, beginning with the solo violin, take center stage in a series of dramatic, operatic statements. There are echoes of both Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony and the music of Berlioz. This opening movement leaves behind traditional sonata form and unfolds as an

introduction and a fugue. The fugue's tempestuous subject is based on the initial motif, heard in the opening bars.

Moving to E major, the second movement (*Adagio*) moves with the stately elegance of a Baroque dance. From its tiptoeing opening bars, it is filled with tenderness and nostalgia.

The ferocious *Scherzo* (*Presto – Un poco meno mosso*) erupts with musical conversations and off balance rhythmic surprises. We never get the return to the *Scherzo*'s "A" section that we might expect. Instead, the trio section drifts away into the distance. The movement concludes with one final musical "joke."

The final movement is an exhilarating orchestral romp. It is propelled forward with the unrelenting energy of the tarantella, a vigorous folk dance from southern Italy. In the final moments, the tarantella seems to have expended its energy. The momentum slows, and there is a brief remembrance of the *Adagio* before the music regains strength and surges to its final cadence.

—Program note by Timothy Judd

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