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Philharmonia Orchestra

Tributes and Transformations

Renee Gilliland, conductor

Monday, Nov. 17, 2025, 7:30 p.m.

Grusin Music Hall

PROGRAM

Avartan

Reena Esmail (b. 1983)

Lytic for Strings

George Walker (1922-2018)

Intermission

Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K.543

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

- I. Adagio - Allegro
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Menuetto: Allegretto
- IV. Allegro

PROGRAM NOTES

Avartan

Reena Esmail (b. 1983)

In Hindustani music, an avartan is a rhythmic cycle. Each avartan returns to its point of origin, while simultaneously moving the music forward into new territory.

This work progresses from what I imagine a listener would perceive as characteristically Indian (almost as if it was the transcription of a Hindustani melody and drone), and then moves slowly along the continuum towards incorporating more Western elements, finally ending with only a brass quartet—but musically coming full circle.

The entire work is an avartan of sorts: it moves along every point of a continuum and ultimately returns to the original point with a renewed perspective.

—Program note by Reena Esmail

Lyric for Strings

George Walker (1922-2018)

Malvina King must have been a remarkable woman. Born into slavery, she lost her first husband when their slaver sold him. Before long she herself escaped and made her way to freedom, and raised a large family in Washington D.C. She was also indirectly responsible for one of the greatest pieces of American string music: it was her death, and the epic and eventful life that preceded it, that inspired her grandson George Walker's *Lyric for Strings*.

Walker's long and illustrious career may have been foretold at his birth: he shared a given middle name, Theophilus, with no less a personage than Mozart. (Mozart Latinized the name to the more-familiar "Amadeus" as a young man.) He already had the makings of a piano virtuoso when he entered Oberlin Conservatory at the age of 14, and he later studied piano with the legendary Rudolf Serkin at Curtis and Robert Casadesus in Paris.

In Paris he came under the tutelage of the legendary Nadia Boulanger, who in her long career taught American composers from Aaron Copland (best known for *Appalachian Spring*) to Quincy Jones (perhaps best-known, and best-paid, for his work producing all of Michael Jackson's big hits). Like many of Boulanger's students Walker learned the art of "keeping the instruments out of one another's way," and counterpoint—the layered dialogue of melodies and countermelodies—drove his long career, which culminated in his being the first Black composer awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1996.

Counterpoint plays a powerful expressive role in Walker's first masterwork, the *Lyric for Strings*. Walker was a 24-year-old graduate student at the Curtis Institute in 1946, when his grandmother and matriarch died just after he'd begun composing the second movement of his First String Quartet. The work immediately became a lament and a memorial, as Walker poured his memories and emotions directly onto the staff paper. By the time the whole quartet was complete, his professors had programmed the *Adagio* onto a string orchestra radio broadcast. Its power was immediately recognized with a standing ovation, and, as the *Lyric for Strings*, it has remained one of the best-loved American string pieces.

While the *Lyric's* origin story and emotional power evoke that of Samuel Barber's *Adagio*—written at Curtis ten years previously—its musical DNA is wholly its own and its effect is both more hopeful and more subtle. Walker's affinity for Black spirituals and American folk music is readily apparent in its mournful opening melody and minor harmonies, but that melody is immediately engaged by countermelodies that introduce murmurs of hope. Hope and pain thread intimately together as major harmonies struggle to push through; after a shattering climax, hope and consolation remain, and the throbbing heartbeat of the piece's counterpoint finally yields to an ineffable peace.

—Program note by Chris Vaneman

Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K.543

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Three years before his death in 1791, Mozart embraced a renewed zest for writing symphonies in the summer of 1788. Two years before, his successful “Prague” Symphony No. 38, forecast possible changes in its expanded drama, highly contrasting dynamics, change of standard symphony form (no minuet) and textural contrasts (more polyphony). Martin Bookspan explained in *101 Masterpieces of Music and their Composers*, “he had an inner compulsion to create—a matter of personal expression without regard to the demands of patrons or public. That motivation goes far to explain their extraordinary scope and striking ingenuity which surely would have been lost on audiences of that time.”

Mozart’s energetic focus produced his three last symphonies, 39, 40 and 41, on June 26, July 25 and August 10. This trilogy stands apart from his previous symphonic repertoire in innovation, emotion, increased dissonance, and profound content. How did he do it? On June 1788 he wrote to a friend with disarming simplicity, “As it is, I have very little to do in town, and I am not exposed to many visitors, I shall have more time for work.” Precisely why he did it has been the topic of speculation over many years.

Mozart’s stellar productivity at this time was in marked contrast to the depressing personal struggles in his life. First of all, he was financially broke. Viennese audiences had moved on to favor other composers and his popularity waned. Consequently, he had few concert opportunities and commissions were lacking. He begged for help from his friend Michael Puchberg, “Just imagine my situation: sick and full of worry and grief... I am forced to sell

my quartets {K 575, 589, 590] for a trifle just to get some cash into my hands and meet my immediate obligations ... Anything would be a help just now ... If you could possibly be kind enough to lend me around one or two thousand gulden, over one or two years at a suitable rate of interest, you really would be doing me a favor.” Later, after a failed European tour in 1789 to raise money he wrote, “I haven’t the heart to be in your company because I would be obliged to admit that I cannot possibly pay you back what you are owed and I beg you to be patient with me. I am so sorry.”

His Symphony No. 39 had zero fanfare or announcement vis-a-vis its introduction. There is no firm date for its premiere, and Mozart’s plan to introduce it at the “Concerts in the Casino” series was cancelled due to lack of ticket sales. Sometimes upcoming concerts programmed an “unidentified symphony” which possibly was number 39. Compounding this sad situation was the death of his only daughter three days after he completed K. 543.

The first movement, *Adagio-Allegro*, opens with a slow, serious, chromatic introduction, colored by brass fanfares and descending lines. Such solemnity was a new type of beginning for Mozart. And he offered another innovation—his orchestration omits oboes and includes, instead paired clarinets.

This stately beginning yields quietly to the opening Allegro section. However, instead of a brisk beginning, the music begins modestly in 3/4 meter before announcing contrasting, substantial main themes. From that point forward, Mozart takes firm control, following traditional sonata-allegro format for the duration of this movement.

The *Andante con moto* begins quietly with the declamation of its main theme which is repeated. Another theme enters and again is repeated. Mozart omits a full development section and opts for tonal and dynamic coloration of his ideas instead of motivic treatment. Tempo changes also add variety. Notice the sharing of material throughout the orchestra—horns and winds, for example. The material used herein is derived in part from a sketch for his “Prague” symphony.

A traditional Austrian landler, a country based folk dance, provides the content for a minuet. This choice results in a bit of informality and geniality, rather than the poised aloofness traditional minuet behavior. Clear accentuation propels the theme. The mid-section trio contrasts by featuring a duet between a clarinet and flute in a quiet, unique combination with occasional tiny string participation.

Mozart chooses a single theme, which emerges in two formats for his finale—each begins the same way, but continues into different regions as they extend. A rapid idea immediately dances onto the stage, with energetic orchestral responses. The music reflects high spirits and deft craftsmanship as the tune (in both shapes) is treated to ingenious, zippy personality changes in the development. Rhythms are precise; dynamics are colorful; the tempo unflagging. Listen for his extensive writing for winds which add light, imitative commentary throughout. A traditional recapitulation concludes the movement without fanfare—there is no coda.

—Program note by © Marianne Williams Tobias, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, 2016.

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