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2023-24 Season



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# Philharmonia Orchestra

## Triumph and Beauty

Renee Gilliland, conductor

7:30 p.m., Monday, Sept. 25, 2023

Grusin Music Hall

## Program

### Euryanthe Overture

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

### Serenade

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

## — Intermission —

### Symphony No. 8, Op. 88 in G Major

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Adagio
- III. Allegretto grazioso
- IV. Allegro ma non troppo

# Program notes

*Text that is bold and underlined is a hyperlink and can be clicked or tapped for more information.*

## Euryanthe Overture

Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826)

It comes as no surprise that Carl Maria von Weber's greatest achievements were as an opera composer. His father and mother belonged to a travelling theatrical troupe, which meant that young Carl (1786-1826) grew up in the theater. By the age of 17, he had written several pieces of theater music and had gained an appointment as music director to the provincial German city of Breslau. Weber immediately set about transforming the opera there—retiring older singers, demanding increased rehearsal time and expanding the repertoire. Weber was poisoned as thanks for all of this hard work—he drank a glass of engraving acid doctored to look like wine. During his recuperation, the Breslau philistines who did not want to retire, rehearse or learn new music dismantled Weber's innovations, so the composer resigned in protest.

Weber spent the next decade moving from post to post, establishing a reputation as a concert pianist and having a string of mildly scandalous love affairs. Finally in 1817, he became music director in Dresden; it was during his time there that he composed his “Grand Heroic-Romantic Opera” *Euryanthe*, which had its premiere in Vienna in 1823. The work's improbable story (which includes such devices as a poison ring and visitors from the spirit world) and brutal length (more than four hours) made it a subject of derision, and it would be another 20 years before Europe would embrace both of these traits in the operas of Richard Wagner, whose works were made possible by Weber's. For *Euryanthe's* story, Weber and his librettist had turned to the epics of the Middle Ages, foreshadowing Wagner's preference for such subjects on the grounds of their Germanness.

Weber crafted *Euryanthe's* overture from thematic material that recurs later in the opera. Many of the motives are associated with specific characters or situations, a technique that Wagner would develop later in his own operas. The

vigorous opening section contains two themes, both associated with the hero. The overture's eerie central section is dominated by the strings, which play chillingly stark music associated with the ghost of the hero's dead sister. The music increases in intensity before a return to the lively music with which the overture began brings it to a close.

—Program note by John Mangum

## Serenade

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Still was a pioneer for African-Americans in “classical” music composition; he was the first American Black man in practically everything having to do with conducting and composing for symphony orchestras and opera companies. The scion of a distinguished family, he was a descendent of the famous 19th century abolitionist, William Still. While more fortunate members of the family bought their freedom or escaped north, his immediate family was left behind in slavery in the southernmost isolated county in Mississippi (south of Natchez). He was born in Woodville, Mississippi in 1895 to a remarkable woman, who took him out of that agrarian obscurity to Little Rock, Arkansas, where she went on to teach high school for many decades. She and his stepfather gave him great encouragement and created an artistic home environment in what were obviously difficult times for folks with their aspirations. With encouragement and apparently great ambition, he learned the violin, cello and oboe, and at an early age attended Wilberforce University in Ohio with the goal of becoming a composer—especially for the symphony and opera. Soon thereafter he enrolled in Oberlin College, and after military service in WWI, he accepted a position with W.C. Handy (composer of *The Saint Louis Blues*) in New York City.

His career there blossomed—while not achieving fame as a composer right away, he nevertheless worked at the highest levels of New York musical circles as an arranger. Radio and musical theatre became his *métier*, and a veritable who's who of musical luminaries became his associates: Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw, Sophie Tucker, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake—the list is impressive and long. Along the way he studied musical composition, most notably with the important early twentieth-century composer, Edgar Varèse. Soon a flood of

works ensued, and his music ultimately was performed by groups such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic and the BBC Orchestra, to name a few. He left New York in the mid-1930s for Los Angeles, where he spent the rest of his life, and began another successful career arranging and composing for the film and television industry, but focusing on “serious” composition. From then on, a torrent of works ensued: operas, ballets, symphonic poems, orchestral suites, choral music, songs and five symphonies.

*Serenade* was composed in 1957 for the Great Falls High School in Montana. Still’s lifelong long immersion in the stunningly diverse styles and demands of American popular music come to the fore here. That, his remarkable gift for melody, his mastery of orchestration and skill at creating just the right musical atmosphere all bespeak of a distinguished career in stage, radio and television. *Serenade* is cast into a conventional tripartite form that features the ‘cellos in the opening with woodwinds leading in the more active diversion in the middle, returning to the initial material at the end. The cantabile beginning is somewhat redolent of Debussy’s “En bateau” of the *Petite Suite*. But, withal, Still’s gentle work is infused with thoroughly American harmonies and tunes, and is all his own.  
—Program note by William E. Runyan

## **Symphony No. 8, Op. 88 in G Major**

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Compared to Dvořák’s somber Seventh Symphony, composed four years earlier, this G major symphony is decidedly genial and upbeat; and yet, if we listen carefully, we may be surprised by how much minor-key music actually inhabits this major-key symphony, beginning with the solemn introduction, richly scored to spotlight mid-range instruments. But joyful premonitions intrude, thanks to the birdcall of the solo flute. This develops into the ebullient principal theme of the movement, which, when it has run its course, we are likely to recall as overwhelmingly pastoral and optimistic. And yet the mournful music of the introduction returns as the movement progresses, and the development section is full of forbidding passages. This tempering of the bucolic spirit was deliberate. When Dvořák sketched the movement it was unerringly cheerful. The minor-key introduction arrived as an afterthought, as did the considerably more difficult trick of working reminiscences of it into

the existing flow of the piece. In the end, this opening movement provides a splendid example of how the sun seems to shine more brightly after it has been darkened by passing shadows.

Similar contrasts mark the *Adagio*, which even in its opening measures displays considerable ambiguity of mood: lusciously warm-hearted string sequences leading to intimations of a somber march (still in the strings). A third of the way through the movement this reflective disposition is interrupted by what sounds like a village band playing an arrangement from Wagner. The gentle music returns and seems to be ushering this movement to an end when the Wagnerian passion erupts yet again, now even more forcefully, after which this subtly scored movement wends to a peaceful conclusion.

The folk-flavored third movement—a waltz, perhaps—is a bit melancholy, too, its wistfulness underscored by the minor mode. This serves as the traditional scherzo section, though its spirit is more in line with a Brahmsian intermezzo. The central trio section presents some of the most agreeably countrified material Dvořák ever wrote.

Following an opening fanfare, the dance-like finale unrolls as a delightful set of variations (though interrupted by a minor-mode episode) on a theme of inherent breadth and dignity. In his 1984 biography Dvořák, Hans-Hubert Schönzeler offers some insights to the finale in his discussion of the Symphony No. 8, which he considers overall “the most intimate and original within the whole canon of Dvořák’s nine”: “[Dvořák] himself has said that he wanted to write a work different from the other symphonies, with individual force worked out in a new way, and in this he certainly succeeded, even though perhaps in the Finale his Bohemian temperament got the better of him ... The whole work breathes the spirit of Vysoká, and when one walks in those forests surrounding Dvořák’s country home on a sunny summer’s day, with the birds singing and the leaves of trees rustling in a gentle breeze, one can virtually hear the music. ... [The] last movement just blossoms out, and I shall never forget [the Czech conductor] Rafael Kubelík in a rehearsal when it came to the opening trumpet fanfare, say to the orchestra: ‘Gentlemen, in Bohemia the trumpets never call to battle—they always call to the dance!’”

—Program note by James M. Keller

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*Text that is bold and underlined is a hyperlink and can be clicked or tapped for more information.*

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