

CELEBRATING THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE: Allentown Symphony Orchestra joins with pianist Simon Mulligan and local dancers for Gershwin, Copland program

Steve Siegel Special to The Morning Call

It's quite possible that no music evokes the American landscape as strongly as that of George Gershwin and Aaron Copland.

Each paints with a broad brush — Copland's widely spaced chords and vigorous rhythms conspire to create a sound as vividly American as Gershwin's streetwise use of syncopation and jazz riffs.

The Allentown Symphony Orchestra pays tribute to both home-grown composers Feb. 9 and 10 at Miller Symphony Hall.

Pianist Simon Mulligan is soloist in Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm Variations" and "Rhapsody in Blue" in a program that also features Gershwin's colorful "American in Paris" and Copland's beloved "Appalachian Spring Suite," featuring dancers from the Ballet Guild of the Lehigh Valley.

Allentown-area audiences might be excused for thinking that Simon Mulligan is a jazz pianist. He's established a popular following in that genre through his frequent appearances with his trio in the Jazz Upstairs series in Symphony Hall's Rodale Room, backed by local musicians — bassist Gene Perla and drummer Dave Willard.

But Mulligan is a lot more than that. Classical fans might recall his first concert in Allentown was in fact a classical one — Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21, with the Allentown Symphony Orchestra on Valentine's Day weekend in 2012.



The Ballet Guild of the Lehigh Valley will perform artistic director Karen Knerr's new choreography to Aaron Copland's 'Appalachian Spring' on stage with the Allentown Symphony Orchestra. Knerr says the piece will convey 'youthful aspirations and endless possibilities.' (SHARON K. MERKEL / SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL)

“So you see I’m mostly a very sensitive, serious, arrogant English concerto pianist. Classical has always been my main thing, but jazz has always been a happy sideline,” he says.

Mulligan might also have on his list of attributes a healthy sense of humor. Born in London, he began playing the piano at age 3, and taught himself to read music. He studied with Alfred Brendel and the late Alexis Weissenberg, two of the brightest stars in the piano firmament. Early in his career, he was violinist Yehudi Menuhin's accompanist, and also has accompanied the great cellist Lynn Harrell and violinist Joshua Bell.

But, Mulligan says, "I grew up admiring the piano technique of Andre Previn, Dudley Moore, Liberace, Oscar Levant — people who had command of different styles. I’ve always had a jazz group of some sort since I was a pre-teen, and a Dixieland band when I was 11. I grew up listening to all styles of music, particularly early jazz.”

All the above makes Mulligan a perfect match for Gershwin, whose love for popular music and jazz goes back to his first job, plugging show tunes on New York City's lower West Side in the early 1920s.

Just as Gershwin was eventually heard everywhere from jazz joints to opera houses, Mulligan has played with everyone from the Royal Philharmonic to Sting, and continues to perform in jazz clubs in London and New York when not performing in recitals or as a soloist with symphonies.

“Rhapsody in Blue,” composed in 1924, was Gershwin's first major classical work. It was premiered in New York by Paul Whiteman's Concert Band, and became his most popular work.

It established Gershwin's signature style and genius in blending vastly different musical styles in revolutionary ways, especially with its jazz-influenced effects.

But those effects, so striking in both “Rhapsody in Blue” and the “I Got Rhythm Variations,” do not necessarily include improvisation, although Gershwin did improvise much of what he was playing in the work's 1924 premiere, and didn't write out the piano part until after the performance.

“It's a fine line — Gershwin has so many wonderful tunes that can be improvised upon, but for the works I'll be doing I won't be going off the rails and doing all kinds of crazy stuff. I like to keep everything in good taste,” Mulligan says.

“It is lovely music as it is, and my job is drawing out so many of the colors in it, not setting whole cadenzas or embarrassing the music in any way. ‘I Got Rhythm’ in particular has so much wonderful harmonic craziness and wonderful ideas it doesn't need anything added to it, other than my own sense of musical performance.”

Mulligan has extensive experience with “Rhapsody,” and created his own solo version that includes many of the orchestral parts, even the percussion.

“When I was learning the classical concerto repertoire, I would enjoy playing the orchestral tutti sections whenever I could, in addition to the piano part,” he says. “‘Rhapsody’ submits itself quite well that way. I love taking symphonic works and doing my own piano versions.”

Mulligan did just that with some of the works of Leonard Bernstein during last year's Bernstein centennial celebration at Symphony Space in New York City. In addition to performing his own piano transcriptions of "Candide," "On the Town," "West Side Story," and more, he performed Bernstein's "Anniversaries" for piano, with Bernstein's daughter Nina as narrator.

I first heard Mulligan perform "Rhapsody in Blue" with the Reading Symphony Orchestra in April 2018. I was struck by how wonderfully "American" it sounded, and marveled at how Mulligan was able to so effortlessly get into its jazzy, jaunty vibe. It was, in fact, his first performance as an American citizen. "Finally, I was allowed to play Gershwin," jokes Mulligan, whose home is in Weehawken, N.J.

Just as American-sounding is "American in Paris," and while the work's jazz-infused style makes it lots of fun to listen to, it is deceptively hard to play. "Actually, most people don't realize that it is a really a difficult piece to put together.

Gershwin was working in the jazz idiom, and there are a number of sections where he's not perfectly clear what he wanted," says symphony conductor Diane Wittry.

"For instance, there's a section about two-thirds of the way into the piece where I actually have to give a handout to the orchestra where you have to make a choice between playing it straight or to swing it. Some conductors prefer to play it straight, but I'm going to swing it because there are certain markings in the score which I believe hint at what he wanted. But there's nothing of that actually on the page, so the orchestra's got to understand the style."

The piece is also unique because of Gershwin's extensive use of saxophones.

"There's no other composer I can think of who consistently adds three saxophones to a symphonic orchestra. In 'American in Paris,' we'll be doing the original version with the original saxophone parts, which use a lot of soprano sax, which were later on taken out," Wittry says.

And then, of course, there are those famous French taxi horns. "You really can't do the piece without them," Wittry says. "They have to be tuned properly, and since nobody happens to have four tuned French taxi horns just sitting around, they always have to be rented."

After Gershwin, music doesn't get much more American-sounding than Copland's, especially his ballet, "Appalachian Spring." The work has come to epitomize Copland, even if it represents only one stage in a long career, and has even come to epitomize the "American voice" in classical music.

Copland composed the ballet for Martha Graham's company in 1944, and in 1945 he arranged and re-orchestrated the score into the familiar concert suite that will be presented next weekend.

The title originally was going to be "Ballet for Martha," but Graham suggested the "Appalachian Spring" title based on a poem by Hart Crane, "The Dance." Curiously, while the piece evokes the freshness and vigor of springtime so well, the "spring" in its title actually refers to a freshwater spring, not the season.

Set in rural Pennsylvania during the 19th century, its idyllic story of newlyweds building their first farmhouse evoked a simpler time and place that appealed to a nation at war abroad.

Rooted in Americana, the ballet has continued to resonate with audiences.

It made ballet history and cemented Graham's reputation as a leader in modern dance choreography, with its focus on the basic human motions of contraction and release, as opposed to classical ballet's striving for long, fluid movements.

"She's considered the mother of modern dance, and I'm definitely paying homage to her," says Karen Knerr, artistic director of the Ballet Guild of the Lehigh Valley/Pennsylvania Youth Ballet. "But this version is our own, with my own choreography."

Knerr holds a BFA in Dance from Juilliard, where one of her teachers was Ethel Winter, a member of Graham's troupe who performed in the original production of "Appalachian Spring."

Seventeen dancers, ages 13 to 17, will perform on stage in front of the orchestra and on a second platform just below. "I think when we do pieces like this, it's great that the audience can see both the dancers and the musicians. There's movement in the orchestra, too, so hopefully the

audience can see the relationship between the music and the dance,” Knerr says.

The original “Appalachian Spring” focused on distinct characters, primarily a young couple beginning a life together, rebuilding a Pennsylvania farmhouse.

“I don’t really have actual characters. What I’ve tried to do in my version is adapt universal themes from the original ballet,” Knerr says.

“I’ve pulled from it the idea of youthful aspirations and endless possibilities, which I think is wonderful for the dancers, since they’re at that point in life in which they can relate to it. I hope the audience will, too.”

Knerr’s dancers represent ordinary people, as suggested by their simple, loose-fitting costumes. As in the original ballet, Knerr’s version is not completely free of conflict and struggle. “But it’s more about how the dancers support and take courage from one another. I’m really hoping the audience leaves feeling positive by the end. Of course, the biggest inspiration is Copland’s music,” she says.

There are some hints of Graham’s style in Knerr’s choreography. “I’m definitely paying homage to her, preserving some movements from the original ballet – the use of gravity, using the weight of the dancers, drooping down low to the floor,” she says.

“There are no classical ballet tutus here, but in some ways the styles aren’t all that different. It’s all about expression and conveying something to the audience, whether you’re up on your toes or low on the floor.”

DETAILS

Allentown Symphony Orchestra: Appalachian Spring and Rhapsody in Blue

What: Pianist Simon Mulligan joins the orchestra in two Gershwin favorites -- "I Got Rhythm" and "Rhapsody in Blue" -- in a program that also features Gershwin's "American in Paris" and Copland's "Appalachian Spring Suite," with dancers from the Ballet Guild of the Lehigh Valley.

When: 7:30 p.m. Feb. 9, 3 p.m. Feb. 10

Where: Miller Symphony Hall, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown

How much: \$25-\$72; free, 21 and under

Related event: Meet the artist, noon Feb. 8, Miller Symphony Hall stage. Conductor Diane Wittry leads a talk about the music for the weekend's concert with soloist Simon Mulligan. Bring bag lunch. Free.

Post concert event: Jazz music by Mulligan with Gene Perla on bass and Dave Willard on drums, 9:45 p.m. Saturday, Rodale Community Room. One-hour set; cash bar. \$13; discounts to orchestra concert ticketholders

Info: 610-432-6715, millersymphonyhall.org