

An American In Paris

November 22, 2025 7:30pm

Program

Saturday, November 22, 2025 at 7:30pm Mary W. Sommervold Hall, Washington Pavilion

South Dakota Symphony Orchestra Delta David Gier, *conductor*

Darius Milhaud

(1892 - 1974) The Creation of the World

Mary Lou Williams Sele (1910 - 1981)

Mary Lou Williams Selections from Zodiac Suite

IX. Sagittarius VIII. Scorpio

Duke Ellington

(1899 - 1974) Black, Brown and Beige: Suite

I. Black

II. Brown

III. Beige

INTERMISSION

Leonard Bernstein

Symphonic Dances from West Side

(1899- 1974)

Story

George Gershwin (1898 - 1937)

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Program Notes

The Creation of the World

Darius Milhaud

Written by Anna Vorhes

Born

September 4, 1892, in Marseilles, but grew up in Aix-en-Provence



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Died

June 22, 1974, in Geneva, Switzerland

Premiere

October 25, 1923, at Theatre des Champs-Elysee in Paris

Instrumentation

two flutes, (one doubling piccolo), oboe, two clarinets, bassoon, alto saxophone, French horn, two trumpets, trombone, piano, three timpani + two small timpani, one percussionist (snare drum, tenor drum, tambourin, pedal bass drum + cymbal attachment, cymbals, tambourine, wood-block and cowbell), two violins, violincello, double bass. The alto saxophone part appears in the score where a viola part would generally be.

Duration

15 minutes

Something interesting to listen for

Milhaud was intrigued by jazz. He was also a young composer in Paris at a time when experimenting with the materials of music was very in vogue. In this piece you will hear interesting melodies, driving and gentle rhythms at various times, and the sense of jazz within the art music forms of fugue and march. He experiments with polytonality, the technique of having part of the orchestra play in one key while another part plays in a different key. The imitation of African rhythms leads to complex rhythmic language. On first hearing, this may seem unusual, but if you listen carefully it's not hard to follow, or to imagine the story of the ballet.

Program Notes

Darius Milhaud was part of a group of composers recognized as Les Six in Paris. The group were loosely allied, without a common mission, style or shared teachers, though they were all friends and shared a wider group of friends and acquaintances in the artistic community of Paris. The support and critiques they offered each other did help them grow as young composers.

When World War I arrived, Milhaud tried to enlist, but due to health problems was assigned to work with refugees of the war. This led eventually to his position as attaché to Paul Claudel, the ambassador to Brazil and the poet and writer who supplied many librettos to Milhaud. The Brazilian music, that combination of Spanish influence and the rhythm of the indigenous people, intrigued the composer. The two men traveled the world together in the course of their duties, and it was on a visit to London Milhaud first heard jazz. American Billy Arnold brought his band to London, and in 1920, Milhaud heard them which changed his life. He sought out jazz



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performances and in 1922 went to New York to study the genre. He visited the most famous clubs that were the center of jazz development.

Paris at the time was intrigued by both jazz and by Africa and art, music, dance, and culture imported from there. When the Ballet Suédois (Swiss Ballet) commissioned Milhaud to write a new work for them, he started with a creation myth that had been popularized in Swiss poet Blaise Cendrars' collection of African myths. The resulting ballet is in five segments depicting h ow the gods created the earth and mankind. Milhaud knit together music with strong rhythm, melodies that draw us in, and elements of both jazz and art music. The sections, played without a break, are:

- 1. Chaos before Creation
- 2. Lifting Darkness and Creation of Tree, Plants, Insects, Birds and Beasts
- 3. Man and Woman are Created
- 4. The Desire of Man and Woman
- 5. The Kiss

The lifting of darkness section features a fugue using jazz motives. The entire piece has a lightness about it that implies the joy of creation.

The costumes for the original performance, and the unusual feel of the music with its roots in jazz and symphonic music both made the work a curiosity that intrigued audiences, though they weren't sure about the new mix between symphony and jazz band. The composer referred to it as "making wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling."

Perhaps Leonard Bernstein described this work the best when he said, "*The Creation of the World* emerges not as a flirtation but as a real love affair with jazz."

Selections from Zodiac Suite

Mary Lou Williams

Written by Anna Vorhes

Born

May 10, 1910 in Atlanta, Georgia

Died

May 28, 1981 in Durham, North Carolina

Composed

Began in 1942, with the orchestral version following in 1946



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Premiere

The small jazz ensemble premiered on December 21, 1945, with various technical difficulties including the conductor losing a page of the score. In June 1946 at Carnegie Hall. An orchestra of seventy performed the work

Instrumentation

one flute, one oboe, one clarinet, one bassoon, one French horn, one trumpet, one trombone, four percussion, one piano, ten violin I, eight violin II, six viola, six cello, four upright bass

Duration

6 minutes

Something to listen for

The jazz idiom was very natural for Williams as she had been an active performer since she was very young. More surprising is her interest in and imitation of the music of Paul Hindemith, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg. As she composed this twelve movement suite, Williams drew on all the musical influences around her. Originally for a much smaller combo of jazz musicians, as the orchestral version evolved, Williams used many other instruments to create an even more interesting work. According to contemporary reports, some of the improvisatory nature of this was confusing to the first musicians asked to perform this. That isn't apparent in performances of the work today.

Program Notes

Mary Lou Williams was born Mary Elfrieda Scruggs. Her earliest years were spent on her mother's lap during church services, where her mother served as pianist and organist. The family moved to Pittsburgh in 1915, and Mary Lou was exposed to touring jazz bands in addition to sacred music. Her stepfather, Fletcher Burely, bought her a piano so she could hone her developing skills, beginning by age 12 sitting in with touring bands, she gained a reputation as "The Little Piano Girl of East Liberty." She married saxophonist John Williams in 1926 and they moved to Oklahoma. In the 1930s and 1940s she not only performed but wrote arrangements for jazz bands. Earl Hines, Benny Goodman, and Duke Ellington all used and praised her arrangements.

The Zodiac Suite was conceived when a bandmate loaned Williams a book on astrology. The composition developed as a picture of various friends and acquaintances and their respective signs. We will hear *Scorpio* "creative, intense, and passionate" with "a strong and forceful pattern", depicting dancer Katherine Dunham, and *Sagittarius* music in a "triumphant and varied mood" for "those who are usually successful, noble, and magnanimous", depicting pianist Eddie



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Haywood.

Katherine Dunham was a dancer with a strong interest in ethnic dance and connections to anthropology. Dunham used her own degree in anthropology earned at the University of Chicago and the grants she received through the Rosenwald Fund to explore the dances of Africa, the Caribbean, South America and African American experiences. It's not hard to imagine modern dance as we listen to William's music.

Eddie Haywood was a jazz pianist who sometimes accompanies Billie Holiday. In 1947, he suffered a partial paralysis which he worked through and was able to go back to performing in 1951. His own composition Canadian Sunset earned the number two spot on the Billboard charts.

Mary Lou Williams never found financial security. She walked off the stage at Paris nightclub le Boeuf sur le Toit, exhausted, in 1954, and spent the next three years away from the jazz scene. (Interestingly, le Boeuf sur le Toit was a club Darius Milhaud frequented often to hear the jazz that so intrigued him.)

Williams became a Catholic in 1957 and spent much of the rest of her career writing service music. She wrote a number of jazz masses, including one commissioned by the Vatican, *The Mass for Peace and Justice* in 1969. The following year she rescored and expanded the mass and retitled it *Mary Lou's Mass*. In 1975, that mass was performed at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, the first time on record that jazz had been performed there.

Black, Brown and Beige: Suite

Duke Ellington

Written by Anna Vorhes

Born

April 29, 1899, Washington DC

Died

May 24, 1974, New York, NY

Instrumentation

three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo and alto flute), three oboes (3rd doubling English horn), three clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (3rd doubling contrabassoon), four



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horns, four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, alto saxophone, baritone saxophone, jazz bass, timpani, percussion, drum set, harp and strings

Duration

18 minutes

Composed

1942-43, though the thought of doing so had been discussed for ten years or more

World Premiere

January 23, 1943, Carnegie Hall

Something interesting to listen for

Ellington was very clear about his intention to show African American history through this composition. He uses melodies that were part of that history as well as those of his own creation. If something sounds familiar, it probably is one of those folk tunes, though since this composition has been around for more than eighty years, it might also be one of Ellington's own creations. Overall, the infusion of Ellington's sophisticated jazz in an orchestral timbre is fascinating and engaging.

Program Notes

Duke Ellington was the first African American to be invited to perform at Carnegie Hall. He was near the top of his career, with swing music very much a focus in social venues. In all settings, Ellington was aware of representing his race in a positive light. One of his mentors as a young man had emphasized to him and his African American classmates that they would always be judged when they were in public as representatives of their race. Ellington took this admonition seriously, and despite needing to take service elevators to reach the stage, being unable to stay in the nicer hotels where he and his band worked, and the inability to find appropriate places to eat when they were outside African American neighborhoods, he retained his dignity and strove to be a positive role model.

The opportunity to play in the rarified air of Carnegie Hall was one Ellington seized enthusiastically. He set out to write a history of his people in music that would appeal to the audience. The program notes for the premiere of this composition by Irving Kolodin describe Black, Brown, and Beige. (Please recall that the language is that of the 1940s, and Ellington himself often used the term Negro which we designate as obsolete today.)



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"Black depicts the period from 1620 to the Revolutionary War, when the Negro was brought from his homelands and sold into slavery. Here he developed the work songs to assuage his spirit while he toiled; and then the spirituals to foster his belief that there was a reward after death, if not in life. Brown covers the period from the Revolution to the First World War, and shows the emergence of the Negro heroes who rose to the needs of these critical phases of our national history. Beige brings us to the contemporary scene and comments on the common misconception of the Negro, which has left a confused impression of his true character and abilities."

Black, Brown and Beige was reworked by the composer in 1944 as the suite we hear tonight. This is Ellington using all the jazz tools to build something that demonstrates how he thinks and feels about his own culture and background. The original format of the work was never presented again by the composer but he used parts of it liberally in other settings. One of the most famous excerpts was Come Sunday. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson steadfastly refused to ally herself with the jazz genre, but after some persuasion, Duke Ellington convinced her to sing Come Sunday. It was a marvelous success.

Other parts of Black, Brown and Beige found places in concerts and in radio. One jazz station did unusual compositions by jazz composers on Sunday evenings, and Black, Brown and Beige was parceled out over several months.

Beginning with this composition, Ellington became more intrigued by large compositions rather than catch dance tunes. This was his first attempt and something for listeners rather than the party atmosphere of a jazz club. While his critics were perplexed in the 1940s, today we enjoy this as part of the orchestra repertoire.

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

Leonard Bernstein

Written by Anna Vorhes

Born

August 25, 1918, Lawrence, MA

Died

October 14, 1990, New York, NY

Composed

This suite was excerpted from the successful original musical by Bernstein with assistance of Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal



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Premiered

February 13, 1961, Carnegie Hall, New York, performed by the New York Philharmonic, Lukas Foss conducting, as part of a gala in support of a pension fund. The concert was called "A Valentine for Leonard Bernstein."

Instrumentation

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, e-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano/celesta, and strings

Duration

24 minutes

Something to listen for

West Side Story investigated the sounds drawn from the Puerto Rican culture which was growing in New York City in the 1950s. It also included popular jazz rhythms and instrumentation. Along with the expected ballads and ensemble numbers there are examples of Cha Cha and Mambo. You will hear jazz rhythms along with the inclusion of saxophone and a full complement of brass, percussion, and wind instruments. The work is presented without pauses between sections though they are woven together so that those familiar with the musical can imagine the scenes and solos that originally used the music as an integral part.

Program Notes

In 1949 Jerome Robbins presented Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents with the idea for a reworking of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The idea was based in the East Side of New York City and featured romance between a Jewish young woman and an Irish Catholic young man. A number of circumstances postponed further discussion, including other projects for those involved. For Bernstein it was the premier of *Candide*. By the time the project came up again the tension between rapidly growing Hispanic communities – Mexican in Los Angeles and Puerto Rican in New York – led to resetting the conflict to the West Side of New York and making the lead couple a Puerto Rican woman and a Polish/Irish Catholic man.

Jerome Robbins choreographed the resulting musical. When Laurents opted out of the project, young Stephen Sondheim was encouraged to become the librettist as it would bring him in close working contact with Bernstein. The resulting musical included dance scenes that stretched the boundaries of ballet in a musical. The choral numbers in ensemble scenes proved the classical control of Bernstein's writing could enhance something that relied on popular genres. The emotional content

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gripped the audience. When the musical opened in September 1957 it became an immediate hit.

A symphonic suite seemed inevitable. Bernstein enlisted the help of Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal to produce this suite. From the plaintive *Somewhere* to the jazz of *Cool* the dances that produce the thread of the plot even without the words come together to create a very entertaining suite. As the movie remains accessible to viewers the audiences remain familiar with the story here told only through the music of dance. Even without the physical dancers presenting the story we can follow. The orchestra is asked to incorporate a few sounds the cast would add to the music – finger snaps and shouts of *Mambo* in appropriate places – but it doesn't detract from the orchestral experience.

The work is a single movement in nine sections. The sections are clearly separated by connecting material. They are:

Prologue: The opening dance sequence, originally presented by young men in blue jeans and t-shirts, is presented by the orchestra. The opening gesture is a three-note phrase ending with a tritone, sending listeners into the cool jazz realm.

Somewhere: The poignant ballad of longing sets up the sense of doomed romance.

Scherzo: A normal bustling street life is the inspiration for this section, though *Somewhere* does reappear toward the end.

Mambo: Latin American dance rhythms lead this section. Pay attention to the brass as they use various mutes to good effect.

Cha-Cha: Based on a Cuban dance form, Bernstein changes the mood of the hero's solo *Maria* into their first dance together. This dance is accomplished without words to each other.

Meeting Scene: The music that was originally the backdrop for the words shared between the star-crossed lovers connects the dances to the building tension between the gangs.

Cool: The vocal fugue that builds tension in the musical is recast with instruments. The intensity is palpable.

Rumble: The final fight between the gangs cannot come to a good end. A poignant flute solo finishes the rumble, helping us hear the now deserted streets.

Finale: Suitable music for heartbreak with echoes of earlier melodies and the cries of those left behind after violence echoing through the orchestra.

West Side Story is still produced today, though as our attitudes continue to change toward increasing cultural awareness it



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seems a bit dated. Productions have included the Puerto Rican Sharks speaking and singing in Spanish among other attempts at being more aware of today's values. While there is room for criticism of depictions of the gangs in the musical, the music remains a masterpiece of Bernstein's ability to incorporate his wide body of compositional tools to create something amazing.

An American In Paris

George Gershwin

Written by Anna Vorhes

Born

September 26, 1898, Brooklyn, NY

Died

July 11, 1937, Hollywood, CA

Composed

March-June 1928, while Gershwin was in Paris

Premiere

December 13, 1928, in New York by the New York Philharmonic under Walter Damrosch

Instrumentation

three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, three saxophones (alto, tenor, and baritone), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, bells, cymbals, snare drum, taxi horns, tom-toms, triangle, xylophone), celesta, and strings

Duration

16 minutes

Something to listen for

The title of this gives us what Gershwin wanted us to hear. His visit to Paris was exhilarating. The city was the home to many jazz clubs as well as its own historic charm. The sound of modern engines and car horns was pervasive. Gershwin asks for sounds from four of the now old-fashioned car horns that he heard in Paris. We can imagine ourselves exploring Paris alongside the composer almost a century ago.

Program Notes

From his first awareness of music, George Gershwin loved the popular songs of the American people. His goal in life was not to become a great symphonic composer, but to become a writer of songs people would sing, hum, and whistle. He



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achieved that goal with his catalogue of popular songs, and even his serious orchestral and opera creations provide melodies most people recognize and indeed sing, hum, and whistle.

The Gershwin family owned a piano, and George and his brother Ira both took lessons. His most influential teacher was Charles Hambitzer, who taught the boys the great literature of the instrument. Hambitzer championed the young George, although he didn't agree with his pupil's desire to write in popular idioms.

Gershwin's love of popluar music led him to seek a job on Tin Pan Alley where music was published and live pianists demonstrated the new music available. He became a song plugger, one of those pianists playing new compositions to encourage purchase, practicing his classical music when he was not otherwise occupied and composing songs to rival those he was plugging. His first big success was Swanee in 1919. One of his fellow song pluggers named Harry Ruby said of Gershwin at this early part of his career:

"Sometimes when he spoke of the artistic mission of popular music we thought we was high-fallutin'."

Gershwin on the other hand felt that learning to play Bach and the music of the rest of the art, music composers could give him the tools he needed to write successful popular songs.

In 1928, Gershwin traveled to Paris. His visit inspired this tone poem, *An American in Paris*, which creates the picture of an American tourist on a Parisienne boulevard. The work is intended to evoke the sights and emotions of a man visiting the cosmopolitan city. The percussion section must seek out four car horns of the 1920's, preferably French, to make sure the impact is just right. The depiction of his visit includes wonder, joy, and the inevitable homesickness of the tourist.

An American in Paris found a home on the big screen of movie making. In 1951, the title was used as title and plot for a movie musical. The musical includes a ballet sequence including this composition. Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron created pictures impossible to eradicate from the minds of those who have seen their dancing. The movie became the third musical in Academy history to be named the best picture of the year.

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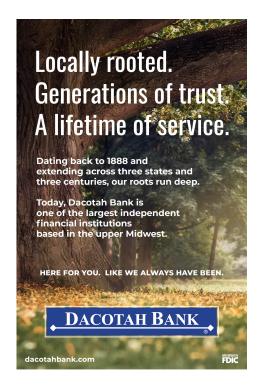
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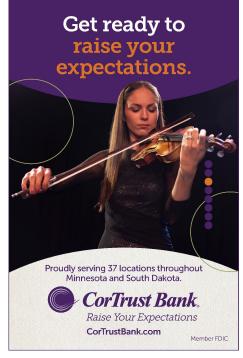






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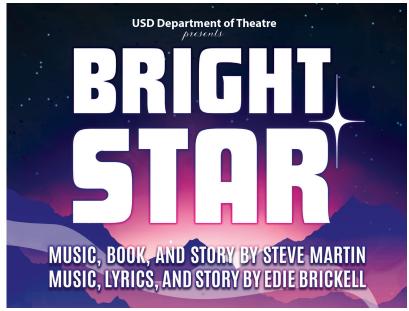






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