

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra  
2016-2017 Mellon Grand Classics Season

February 24, 25 and 26, 2017

LAHAV SHANI, CONDUCTOR  
JON KIMURA PARKER, PIANO

CHARLES IVES                      *The Unanswered Question*

KURT WEILL                      Symphony No. 2  
I.     Sostenuto — Allegro molto  
II.    Largo  
III.   Allegro vivace

Intermission

GEORGE GERSHWIN              *Rhapsody in Blue* for Piano and Orchestra  
orchestrated by Ferde Grofé  
**Mr. Parker**

LEONARD BERNSTEIN              Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*  
Prologue — “Somewhere” — Scherzo — Mambo —  
Cha-Cha — Meeting Scene — “Cool” Fugue — Rumble —  
Finale

## PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

### CHARLES IVES

#### *The Unanswered Question* (1906)

Charles Ives was born in Danbury Connecticut on October 20, 1874 and died in New York City on May 19, 1954. *The Unanswered Question* was written in 1906 but was not premiered until May 11, 1946 in a performance at Columbia University, led by fellow American composer Elliott Carter. The Pittsburgh Symphony first performed the piece on February 14, 1975, with conductor Thomas Michalak, and most recently performed it on May 8, 2005, with conductor David Robertson. The scores calls for two flutes, oboe, clarinet, solo trumpet and strings. **Performance time: approximately 6 minutes.**

*The Unanswered Question*, subtitled “A Contemplation of Something Serious,” is one of Ives’ most visionary and frequently performed works. It was written in 1906 along with a companion piece, *Central Park in the Dark in the Good Old Summer Time* (“A Contemplation of Nothing Serious”), when Ives was trying out all manner of sound combinations in his music. *The Unanswered Question* comprises three distinct kinds of music, superimposed: a string chorale, an unchanging trumpet phrase and a chattering woodwind response. Ives assigned these unlikely partners the following philosophical roles: “The strings play *pianississimo* throughout with no change in tempo. They are to represent the ‘Silence of the Druids — Who Know, See and Hear Nothing.’ The trumpet intones ‘The Perennial Question of Existence,’ and states it in the same tone of voice each time. But the hunt for ‘The Invisible Answer’ undertaken by the flutes and other human beings, becomes gradually more active, faster and louder.... ‘The Fighting Answerers,’ as the time goes on and after a ‘secret conference,’ seem to realize a futility, and begin to mock ‘The Question’ — the strife is over for the moment. After they disappear, ‘The Question’ is asked for the last time, and ‘The Silences’ are heard beyond in ‘Undisturbed Solitude.’” This turn-of-the-20th-century work continues to be disturbing, challenging and thought-provoking: “The world today makes us so aware of unanswered questions that the basic idea of the piece is easy to grasp,” wrote musicologist Edward Downes.

### KURT WEILL

#### Symphony No. 2 (1933-1934)

Kurt Weill was born in Dessau, Germany on March 2, 1900 and died in New York City on April 3, 1950. He composed his Symphony No. 2 during the years 1933 and 1934, and it received its premiere on October 11, 1934, by the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra led by Bruno Walter. The Pittsburgh Symphony gave its first and only performances of Symphony No. 2 on September 17 & 19, 1971, with Music Director William Steinberg. The score calls for woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, two horns, two trumpets, two trombones, timpani and strings. **Performance time: approximately 28 minutes.**

Kurt Weill first registered in the German musical consciousness with a series of instrumental pieces in traditional forms composed during the early 1920s — a cello sonata, a symphony, a divertimento, a string quartet, a ballet — and he won wide fame with the theater pieces created with Bertold Brecht between 1927 and 1931 that perfectly reflected the taste and tone of the Weimar Republic: *The Threepenny Opera*, *Happy End*, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Knowledge of this brash new Jazz Age composer reached Paris through recordings and a 1931 French-language film of *The*

*Threepenny Opera* (whose title, perhaps due to the rampant inflation of the day, became *L'Opéra de quat-sous*), and the city's trend-setting music lovers were curious to learn more about Kurt Weill.

A chamber music society called *La Sérénade* (whose members included Darius Milhaud, a friend of Weill since they met at a contemporary music festival in Baden-Baden in 1927) invited Weill to give a concert of his music on December 11, 1932, and he sent his student Maurice Abravanel (later the highly regarded music director of the Utah Symphony) to oversee the event. Two socially scathing theater pieces by Brecht and Weill were performed — *Mahagonny Songspiel* (a “style study” for the complete three-act opera, about an imaginary American city whose licentious citizens are condemned to hell by God only to respond that they had already been there) and *Der Jasager* (“*The ‘Yes’-Sayer*,” about a boy who becomes ill on a mountain expedition and consents to be thrown off a precipice rather than jeopardize the collective good) — and created a sensation. Stravinsky, Cocteau, Picasso, Honegger, Gide and other of the city's brightest cultural luminaries attended and expressed their admiration, and Milhaud recorded that “smart society was as carried away as if it had been the first performance of a Bach *Passion*.”

In January 1933, Weill received a commission for a new symphony from the Princess Edmond de Polignac (*née* Winnaretta Singer), the American-born heiress to the sewing-machine fortune and a leading Parisian patron of the arts who also ordered works from Ravel, Debussy, Stravinsky, Fauré, Poulenc and other front-rank composers. Weill had not written a concert work since the 1923 *Quodlibet for Orchestra*, and the request excited a dormant strain of his creativity. He started sketching his Symphony No. 2 in Berlin before the end of the month, but Hitler's accession to power on January 30th wrenched life in Germany out of its recognized patterns, most immediately for Jews. The caustically radical stage works of Weill and Brecht were declared undesirable, and composer and librettist fled the country. Brecht tramped through Prague, Vienna, Zurich and Lugano before settling in Carona, an isolated village nestled in the Italian Alps; Weill headed straight for Paris, taking with him the manuscript of the gestating Symphony. (Weill's music was not heard again in Germany until 1945, except as accompaniment for the infamous display of “Decadent Art” that the Nazis mounted in Düsseldorf in 1938 and toured through the country.)

Almost as soon as Weill arrived in Paris, on March 23, 1933, he received a commission (with the help of Abravanel) from Boris Kochno (Diaghilev's former secretary and collaborator), choreographer George Balanchine and the wealthy English philanthropist Edward James for a “ballet with songs” that would be a modern retelling of the Medieval morality plays depicting the *Seven Deadly Sins*. The work was premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in June and repeated the following month in London, after which Weill again took up the Second Symphony while vacationing in Switzerland and Italy. The autumn was eventful — finalizing a divorce from Lotte Lenya, his foremost interpreter but impossible marriage companion; signing up with the Parisian publisher Heugel when Universal Edition in Vienna voided his contract; moving into a new apartment in the Parisian suburb of Louveciennes; attending the Italian premieres of *Mahagonny* and *Der Jasager* in Rome — and the Symphony No. 2 was not completed until the following February. Abravanel convinced his conducting colleague Bruno Walter, a Mahler protégé and another artistic refugee from Germany, to include the premiere of the work on his concert with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra on October 11, 1934. The new Symphony, with its blending of classical forms and theatrical influences, was applauded by the public but received with disappointment by the critics. When Walter played the work with the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall in New York City in December, he renamed it *Three Night Scenes*, but still found critical resistance. The Symphony effectively vanished during the difficult years that followed, and it became available again only when Heugel published the score in 1966.

David Schiff, composer, teacher (at Reed College in Portland, Oregon) and author (of the most important book on Elliott Carter and frequent feature articles in *The New York Times*), wrote the following perceptive appreciation of Weill's Symphony No. 2 in an article in the June 2000 *Atlantic Monthly* observing the centennial of the composer's birth (and fiftieth anniversary of his death):

“The Second Symphony is the pinnacle of Weill's career and one of the great works of the [20th] century. In fact, it sums up the musical revolution that Weill had begun as an *enfant terrible* in the mid-1920s — a revolution that glorified the tunefulness of popular song and the catchy rhythms of the foxtrot and the tango as an alternative to the hyperbolic excesses of music from Wagner to Schoenberg. Over the preceding hundred years, music had become increasingly complex in syntax, form and expression — an evolutionary trend that culminated just before World War I with the dense, atonal counterpoint of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and the asymmetric, unpredictable rhythms of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. After the war, with the musical language dismantled like much of the European landscape, young composers — in effect the first post-modernists — had to rebuild the language and re-establish its social

function. First under Busoni's tutelage and then under Brecht's, Weill returned to simple harmonies and rhythms. He did not go back to Bach, as did the Neo-Baroque Hindemith, or to Pergolesi, as did the Neo-Classical Stravinsky: if Weill had any musical model, it was probably Mahler, but Weill removed all traces of Mahler's nostalgia, grandiosity and bombast, and also his contrapuntal complexity and elephantine structure. What remained was Mahler's ironic and tragic sense of life, to which Weill added a sharply bitter aftertaste that captured the contemporary mood.

"The Symphony has three movements, with a funeral-march introduction that anticipates the second movement rather than the first. This Mahlerian ploy soon leads to a fast movement of Mozartean lucidity. Written in triple time, it is not quite a waltz and not quite a march, variously bittersweet, menacing and militant — close in mood to the spiritual exhaustion of *The Seven Deadly Sins*. The second movement, as leisurely as the first movement was concise, is closer to Bruckner than Mahler, for there is no grotesquerie or irony even when a solo trombone carries the melody. The music makes its mournful way like a procession slowly crossing a ravaged city, becoming sadder with every return of its themes. The third movement juxtaposes jubilation and mockery. The music recovers its rhythmic life and then with two shrieking piccolos takes on the sound of an army band — or is it the sound of militant resistance? Toward the close, the movement turns into a frantic tarantella, a dance of death punctuated by a prophetic chant from the trumpet. It whirls toward triumph or disaster, all the more terrifying because we cannot decide which it will be."

## GEORGE GERSHWIN

### *Rhapsody in Blue* for Piano and Orchestra (1924)

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York on September 26, 1898, and died in Hollywood, California on July 12, 1937. He composed *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, and the piece was premiered at Aeolian Hall in New York City on February 12, 1924, with band leader Paul Whiteman and Gershwin at the piano. Gershwin worked with orchestrator Ferde Grofé for both the original jazz band version heard at the premiere and the full orchestra scoring heard this weekend. The Pittsburgh Symphony gave its first performance of *Rhapsody in Blue* at Syria Mosque on November 19, 1933, conducted by Antonio Modarelli and featuring Gershwin as soloist. Most recently, the piece was performed on June 24, 2012, with Marvin Hamlisch conducting and Kevin Cole as soloist. The full orchestra score calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, two bassoons, three horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings. **Performance time: approximately 16 minutes.**

For George White's *Scandals of 1922*, the 24-year-old George Gershwin provided something a little bit different — an opera, a brief, somber one-acter called *Blue Monday* (later retitled *135th Street*) incorporating some jazz elements that White cut after only one performance on the grounds that it was too gloomy. *Blue Monday*, however, impressed the show's conductor, Paul Whiteman, then gaining a national reputation as the self-styled "King of Jazz" for his adventurous explorations of the new popular music styles with his Palais Royal Orchestra. A year later, Whiteman told Gershwin about his plans for a special program the following February in which he hoped to show some of the ways traditional concert music could be enriched by jazz, and suggested that the young composer provide a piece for piano and jazz orchestra. Gershwin, who was then busy with the final preparations for the upcoming Boston tryout of *Sweet Little Devil* and somewhat unsure about barging into the world of classical music, did not pay much attention to the request until he read in *The New York Times* on New Year's Day that he was writing a new "symphony" for Whiteman's program. After a few frantic phone calls, Whiteman finally convinced Gershwin to undertake the project, a work for piano solo (to be played by the composer) and Whiteman's 22-piece orchestra — and then told him that it had to be finished in less than a month.

Themes and ideas for the new piece immediately began to tumble through Gershwin's head, and late in January, only three weeks after it was begun, the *Rhapsody in Blue* was completed.

The premiere of the *Rhapsody in Blue* — New York, Aeolian Hall, February 12, 1924 — was one of the great nights in American music. Many of the era's most illustrious musicians attended, critics from far and near assembled to pass judgment, and the glitterati of society and culture graced the event. Gershwin fought down his apprehension over his joint debuts as serious composer and concert pianist, and he and his music had a brilliant success. "A new talent finding its voice," wrote Olin Downes, music critic for *The New York Times*. Conductor Walter Damrosch told Gershwin that he had "made a lady out of jazz," and then commissioned him to write the *Concerto in F*. There was critical carping about laxity in the structure of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, but there was none about its vibrant, quintessentially American character or its melodic inspiration, and it became an immediate hit, attaining (and maintaining) a position of popularity almost unmatched by any other work of a native composer.

## LEONARD BERNSTEIN

### Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* (1957)

Leonard Bernstein was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts on August 25, 1918 and died in New York City on October 14, 1990. The musical *West Side Story* was premiered at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York City on September 26, 1957, with Max Goberman conducting. Several years later, Bernstein worked to orchestrate several of the dances into a symphonic suite, premiered by the New York Philharmonic on February 13, 1961 with Lucas Foss conducting. The Pittsburgh Symphony did not perform the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story* until January 7, 1994 with conductor Kirk Muspratt, and most recently performed the full film score on November 8, 2015 with conductor Jayce Ogren. The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, alto saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celesta and strings. **Performance time: approximately 23 minutes.**

*West Side Story* was one of the first musicals to explore a serious subject with wide social implications. More than just the story of the tragic lives of ordinary people in a grubby section of New York, it was concerned with urban violence, juvenile delinquency, clan hatred and young love. The show was criticized as harshly realistic by some who advocated an entirely escapist function for the musical, depicting things that were not appropriately shown on the Broadway stage. Most, however, recognized that it expanded the scope of the musical through references both to classical literature (*Romeo and Juliet*) and to the pressing problems of modern society. Brooks Atkinson, former critic of *The New York Times*, noted in his book *Broadway* that *West Side Story* was "a harsh ballad of the city, taut, nervous and flaring, the melodies choked apprehensively, the rhythms wild, swift and deadly." Much of the show's electric atmosphere was generated by its brilliant dance sequences, for which Jerome Robbins won the 1957-1958 Tony Award for choreography. In 1961, Bernstein chose a sequence of dance music from *West Side Story* to assemble as a concert work, and Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal executed the orchestration of these "Symphonic Dances" under the composer's direction. Bernstein said that he called these excerpts "symphonic" not because they were arranged for full orchestra but because many of them grew, like a classical symphony, from a few basic themes transformed into a variety of moods to fit the play's action and emotions. *West Side Story*, like a very few other musicals — *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma*, *Pal Joey*, *A Chorus Line*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Rent*, *Hamilton* — provides more than just an evening's pleasant diversion. It is a work that gave an entirely new vision and direction to the American musical theater.