NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
JACQUES LACOMBE MUSIC DIRECTOR
NEEME JÄRVI CONDUCTOR LAUREATE

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

BY LAURIE SHULMAN, ©2010

GALA OPENING NIGHT CELEBRATION

Welcome to the start of a new era.

Jacques Lacombe's inaugural concert as New Jersey Symphony Orchestra Music Director has been crafted to showcase his interests and aspects of his career. Thus, the program touches on opera and ballet in addition to symphonic literature. The world premiere of Robert Aldridge's Suite from *Elmer Gantry* demonstrates Lacombe's interest in new music and in New Jersey composers. Soprano Jeanine De Bique exemplifies the rising young talent that Lacombe is committed to nurturing; violinist Joshua Bell embodies the Music Director's commitment to continuing the NJSO's tradition of bringing internationally renowned stars to New Jersey. This Gala Opening Night Celebration is an irresistible sampler that bodes well for the future.

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The Marriage of Figaro was the first of **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**'s (1756–91) three collaborations with Lorenzo da Ponte. The Italian poet crafted his superb libretto from a French play that was considered subversive by the Viennese monarchy. In order to secure approval from the imperial censors, da Ponte had to downplay the drama's political aspect and capitalize on its

inherent comedy. In his music, Mozart matched and surpassed da Ponte's admirable achievement.

Mozart's **overture** is remarkable for several reasons. It includes no actual themes from the opera, yet it captures the work's comic, effervescent atmosphere with exquisite skill. Always a master of formal structure, Mozart wrote a tightly unified sonata form movement without an ounce of pedantry. To the contrary, his overture is filled with joy and enthusiasm, sounding as spontaneous as if it were jotted down on the spur of the moment.

Those discovering the piece for the first time will be delighted with Mozart's verve and energy. Others who know it well may smile as they recognize a technique in the coda as Mozart builds toward the decisive final chords. We call it a "Rossini crescendo"—but Mozart understood how to create the same excitement and momentum with consummate artistry, in this case six years before Rossini was born.

"Deh vieni, non tardar" is Susanna's Act II aria in *Figaro*. She is disguised as her mistress, the Countess, in an elaborate ruse to entrap the Countess' husband, Count Almaviva. Having arranged a nocturnal rendezvous with him in the palace garden, she sings a love song bidding him hasten to her. Figaro, eavesdropping, is certain his fiancée is being unfaithful. The simplicity and elegance of Susanna's melodic line and Mozart's incomparable orchestration have made this aria a perennial favorite.

Vincenzo Bellini was one of many composers drawn to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. His

opera *The Capulets and the Montagues*, which premiered in Venice in March 1830, is actually based on an 1818 drama by Luigi Scevola that alters the plot significantly. In this libretto, the lovers have met before the curtain rises, but Juliet is betrothed to Tebaldo. She sings of her longing for Romeo in **"Oh! Quante Volte,"** which opens the opera's second scene.

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Suite from *Elmer Gantry*

Robert Livingston Aldridge (b. 1954)

WORLD PREMIERE AND NJSO COMMISSION

One of Montclair State University's faculty stars is composer **Robert Aldridge**, who has written more than 60 works in every genre of music. The NJSO co-commissioned and performed his tone poem *Leda and the Swan* in 2002. Aldridge's music has been performed widely in Europe and Japan, as well as in the United States. His reputation skyrocketed three years ago with the premiere of ***Elmer Gantry*** at the Nashville Opera in November 2007 and by Peak Performances at Montclair State University in January 2008.

Aldridge's opera is based on Sinclair Lewis' satirical novel, an indictment of fundamentalist religion that caused a ruckus when it appeared in 1927. The score taps into gospel, shape-note hymns, early jazz, barbershop harmony and American popular song of the early 20th century, fusing them skillfully with the apparatus of opera. Aldridge has an admirable gift for melody that served him well in choral passages, as well as solo arias and duets, but it is his vivid orchestral writing that is the star in the **suite** that receives its premiere this evening.

Apart from the opening excerpt, “Is Belief A Gift?,” the suite adheres to the order in which events unfold in the opera. Librettist Herschel Garfein has graciously provided the following summary for the suite:

> Elmer Gantry is a handsome and charismatic football star at a small midwestern college in 1907. He is drafted into the local seminary after allegedly defending the name of Jesus in “The Bar Fight.” Awarded a sizable scholarship for nothing more than his charisma and his gift of gab (“Seminary Prayer”), Elmer enters the seminary. Then, playing his new role to the hilt, he seizes the opportunity to seduce the daughter of the seminary president and to hone his oratorical skills selling farm tools (“Pequot Farm Implements”). One night he meets Reverend Sharon Falconer, the beautiful and inspired leader of a traveling revival mission. Upon seeing and hearing her (“Revival Tent”) in both serene prayer and fiery oratory, he falls in love, flees the seminary and gradually works his way up to become manager of Sharon’s organization. One night, after a business meeting in Sharon’s hotel room, he passionately declares himself; Sharon takes him as a lover, but on her own terms (“Love Duet”). With his business acumen and with her genuine connection to the divine, they become wildly successful on the revival circuit and eventually build a spectacular “Grand Tabernacle” (a precursor to the mega-churches of today) in the city of Zenith, Missouri. The tabernacle’s centerpiece is a “magnificent cross of a thousand electric lights.” On the opening night of the tabernacle, Elmer’s scandalous past catches up to him, conflict ensues, and the cross malfunctions, causing a fire which burns the tabernacle to the ground (“Fire”). Sharon refuses to escape with Elmer. In her dying moments, she is able to convey a redemptive mystical vision to her followers as they are consumed in flames. In the ashes of the destroyed tabernacle, Elmer superficially mourns the loss of Sharon, even as he moves on to his next career as a guru of the New Thought movement.

Aldridge has chosen to structure the *Elmer Gantry* Suite as one continuous movement whose sequential sections are played without pause. Although the opera is richly scored, he faced challenges in reworking it for a purely instrumental suite. He allocates voice parts to instruments, thus the horns and trumpets share the tenor line in the opening "Is Belief a Gift?," Sharon's aria becomes an English horn solo, and so forth. The emotional heart of the suite is the love duet, but the choral numbers and fire scene have an immediacy and energy that are equally compelling.

Aldridge has a gift for Americana that calls to mind the best of Copland. He is clearly adept with a wide variety of indigenous American musical styles, yet his voice is individual. In his *Elmer Gantry* Suite, Aldridge has caught both the spiritual underpinning and the hypocrisy that permeate Lewis' novel. It is a splendid achievement.

Aldridge studied at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, New England Conservatory and Yale, where he earned his doctorate. He has been composer-in-residence at North Carolina's Brevard Festival since 2006, and he also served in that capacity with the Westfield Symphony Orchestra and the American Dance Festival. He has been a MacDowell Colony fellow five times and held a Guggenheim fellowship in 2002. Currently, he chairs the music department at Montclair State's John J. Cali School of Music.

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When **Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835–1921) died at the age of 86, he was considered an outmoded

conservative by much of the trendy Parisian musical establishment. During his heyday, however, he enjoyed enormous popularity both as a virtuoso pianist and as a champion of pure instrumental music.

The **Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, Op. 28,** that Joshua Bell plays this evening was composed in 1863 for the Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate and published in 1870. It was among the earliest in a series of compositions that featured a single instrument with orchestra but were not full-fledged concertos.

As its name implies, the piece consists of two principal sections. The introduction opens with a sentimental melody, but Saint-Saëns doesn't waste much time before providing the soloist with an opportunity to dash off a few virtuosic teasers as a hint of what is coming.

With the rondo section, we are treated to a full-blown show-off vehicle. Always the craftsman first, Saint-Saëns unfolds a comprehensive exposition of two delicious, memorable themes before the fireworks commence. Rondo form, with its periodic restatement of the main theme, provides a convenient reminder that this composer was a master melodist. During the interludes separating the rondo statements, the violinist dazzles us with technical wizardry, yet we never lose sight of the principal theme. At the same time, Saint-Saëns seems to constantly introduce new ones in a profligacy of melodic richness that recalls Mozart. A brief cadenza-like passage near the end heralds a spectacular coda in major mode.

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In the 19th century, Paris was music's Mecca, and the Paris Opéra was a proving ground for all composers of every nationality. A success there was the ultimate goal. Like most of his contemporaries, **Hector Berlioz** (1803–69) sought the recognition and prestige that only a grand opera could give him. With the groundbreaking *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) and other successes under his belt, he set to work in the mid-1830s on an opera based on the memoirs of the 16th-century Florentine goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini. Through political connections and with a considerable amount of lobbying, he secured a production at the Opéra, where *Benvenuto Cellini* opened in September 1838.

The opera bombed. Critics lambasted it, the singers hated it, the conductor François Habeneck was disinclined to put in the extra effort that the complex and difficult music required. After only a handful of feeble performances the opera was withdrawn. *Benvenuto Cellini* languished in ignominy until the late 20th century, when the renaissance of interest in Berlioz's music drew attention to its fiery and imaginative music.

Berlioz knew that the score contained excellent musical material. In 1843, he compiled music from *Benvenuto Cellini* into a concert overture. The result was ***Roman Carnival* Overture, Op. 9,** which did little for the failed stage work, but has become one of the most popular of all of Berlioz's orchestral works.

It opens with a brilliant orchestral flourish that shows off the virtuoso capabilities of the large ensemble and seizes the audience's attention immediately. It then cedes to a more lyrical section, in this case with an English horn proclaiming the melody from the first act love duet between the hero Cellini and his love interest, Teresa. The balance of the overture derives mostly from a lively *saltarello* (the same dance that concludes Mendelssohn's "Italian" Symphony) that anchors *Cellini*'s carnival scenes. An increasing emphasis on brass as the piece gathers momentum adds to the effectiveness. The overture is a superb showpiece that uses Berlioz's brilliant orchestration to great advantage.

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Jules Massenet (1842–1912) is the key link in French music between Gounod and Debussy. A prolific composer, he wrote oratorios, incidental music, ballets, chamber music, piano pieces and songs. But he is best known for his operas, including *Manon*, *Le Cid*, *Esclarmonde*, *Werther*, *Thaïs* and *Cendrillon*.

While ***Thaïs*** (1894) is infrequently produced, the instrumental interlude between the two scenes of its second act has become an orchestral staple. Known as **"Méditation,"** it illustrates the conflict within the courtesan Thaïs as she struggles to decide between a love for material things and a life of pleasure, and the repentance and salvation proposed to her by the monk Athanaël. The part of Thaïs is given to the solo violin. Lush and romantic, Massenet's music paints a multi-faceted and expressive portrait of the temptress who has a good heart beneath her debauched exterior.

Juliet sings **“Ah! Je veux vivre dans le rêve”** in the first act of **Charles Gounod**’s (1818–93) ***Romeo and Juliet*** (1867). The scene takes place at a masked ball at the Capulet residence, before she has met Romeo. Her nurse broaches the subject of the handsome Paris, her intended. Juliet protests that marriage does not interest her. Her solo, a cross between coloratura *arietta* and waltz, is one of the opera’s most memorable numbers.

“Summertime” needs no introduction. Clara’s immortal lullaby opens **George Gershwin’s** (1898–1937) opera ***Porgy and Bess*.** Its subtle melding of blues, opera aria, spiritual and ballad has made it an iconic American song.

Suite from *The Firebird*, 1919 Revised Version

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

The Firebird is adapted from a Russian fairy tale in which a handsome prince is drawn into an enchanted garden and palace by the exotic bird of the title, who is a sort of good fairy. He falls in love with a beautiful captive princess, but he must break the spell of the evil ogre Kashchei, who presides over the palace, before he may claim his bride. Stravinsky was young when he composed *The Firebird*, and he drew heavily on the Tchaikovskyan models, which were essentially derived from French principles. He took great care to bind the music closely to the action on stage. If one listens carefully, even the suite follows the chronological events and essential outline of the story.

The new ballet was an instant success, placing Stravinsky on the musical map virtually overnight. With its brilliant and lush orchestration, he proved how well he had learned from his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov. With his strong reliance upon Russian folk tunes, he acknowledged some debt to the music of all the "Russian Five." The "Ronde des princesses" shares the exotic orientalism of Borodin's lyrical *Polovetsian Dances*; Stravinsky's grandiose and triumphant finale is surely related to Mussorgsky's "Great Gate of Kiev" in *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

In a sense, though, *The Firebird* also marked Stravinsky's break with his homeland. Thereafter he was a citizen of the world, living largely in France and Switzerland, and eventually in the United States. The ballet is at once a traditional work and a turning point, marking both the end of an era and the beginning of a brilliant, lengthy career.

Diaghilev's Ballets russes premiered *The Firebird* in Paris in 1910. The following year, Stravinsky derived a suite from the ballet, concluding with Kashchei's "Infernal Dance." He re-orchestrated the suite in 1919 for a somewhat smaller orchestra, using the Finale of the complete ballet for his conclusion; that is the version that concludes tonight's gala performance.