

Season Finale: An American Rhapsody

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Daniel Bernard Roumain *We Shall Not Be Moved: Symphonic Scenes and Samples*

Violinist and composer Daniel Bernard Roumain—who goes by his initials, DBR—has multiple interests including electronica, jazz, rhythm & blues, urban pop, hip-hop and gospel. Many of his works deal with sociopolitical topics, particularly issues of race. His 2017 opera *We Shall Not Be Moved* examined the legacy of the 1985 MOVE tragedy. When a Philadelphia police helicopter bombed a residence occupied by the MOVE organization, it ignited a fire that killed 11 people and destroyed 62 homes, traumatizing the city. DBR's *Symphonic Scenes and Samples* plumb the operatic score, repurposing its music for orchestra. He writes, "The musical material has been recast into a dense, pulsating symphonic landscape where the operatic arias and choruses have been replaced with each section of the ensemble. . . .The music and ends with sorrow, a plea from the brilliant Marc Bamuthi Joseph's libretto for us to all be ' . . . capable of something better.'"

Various *Surreal Sketches* for Horn, Jazz Trio and Orchestra

When Christopher Komer was appointed the New Jersey Symphony's principal horn in 2017, he suggested an unusual commission: a jazz French horn concerto with a twist: four movements, four composers and the addition of a jazz trio to the orchestra. Komer asked each composer to find inspiration in the art of the Spanish surrealist master Salvador Dalí (1904–89). Komer summarizes, "Dalí is simply one of my all-time favorite artists, and I have always been fascinated by the methods of the Surrealists and their manifesto. I knew these four movements would be very different from one another, and wanted a common thread to connect them." The musical result is *Surreal Sketches*, a composite concerto.

London-based **Vivian Li** chose Dalí's "Galatea of the Spheres," a 1952 portrait of Dalí's wife Gala surrounded by spheres that appear to be suspended in space. The spheres also suggest atomic particles, another of Dalí's interests. Li has written, "Dalí had become interested in atomic theory when he painted [this portrait]. I took inspiration from the work to create a musical imagination of a world made of nothing but tiny floating and

dancing spheres, which are the foundation of all matter in the universe, big and small, living and non-living, ugly and beautiful.”

Komer knew that jazz bassist, composer and arranger **Christian McBride** was classically trained and thought he would welcome the opportunity to write for full orchestra. McBride was drawn to Dalí’s 1941 “Soft Self-Portrait with Fried Bacon.” Dalí described this particular painting as presenting his outer self: this was the glove, not the inner soul. Komer says that McBride’s movement, called simply “Fried Bacon,” swings. “It’s down-home and blues-y; a bit like going to church down South on Sunday—but also like a party,” he observes.

The Cuban American jazz legend **Paquito D’Rivera** opted for a different starting point: not a Dalí work, but rather a painting by Omar Corrales inspired by Dalí’s art. D’Rivera’s movement, “Dali in the Tropics,” contains elements of the *Danzón* and other Afro-Cuban rhythms. “Paquito’s movement is sublimely sophisticated in its tropical, intoxicatingly Latin way,” summarizes Komer.

Surreal Sketches concludes with **Gary Morgan**’s “Metamorphosis of Narcissus.” Morgan delved deeply into the legend of Narcissus and Dalí’s hallucinatory 1937 painting. Narcissus is represented by the French horn, the nymph Echo by the flute. Komer says, “Gary’s got extensive experience writing for big band, but this was his maiden voyage in symphonic writing. He challenges my range on the horn. I love the improv section, where he uses full strings during my solo.”

Aaron Dworkin/Samuel Coleridge-Taylor *The American Rhapsody: Symphonic Variations on an African Air*
 Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was an Afro-British composer whose popularity in the early 20th century briefly eclipsed Edward Elgar’s. Born to a Black father from Sierra Leone and a white English mother, Coleridge-Taylor identified with his African heritage and regarded the dignity of the Black man as part of his artistic mission. His *Symphonic Variations on an African Air* is Coleridge-Taylor’s most ambitious and successful orchestral composition. Aaron Dworkin chose it as the musical canvas for his spoken word, multimedia work *The American Rhapsody*. Dworkin selected the text from speeches and writings by George Washington: not only our nation’s first president but also a gifted military commander, patriot and entrepreneur who valued education and the arts. Dworkin combined words and music in a process he has dubbed “musetry.” The narrative delivers America’s story in Washington’s words. Dworkin has framed it as a tribute to freedom, courage and other ideals, as well as addressing the moral stains inherent in our history.

George Gershwin *An American in Paris*

An American in Paris is perhaps best known as part of the soundtrack to Vincente Minnelli's 1951 film. But Gershwin composed it decades earlier, in 1928. His score captures the naïveté of the innocent abroad and the *joie de vivre* of the world's most romantic city, right down to the din of its traffic. Gershwin's music makes it easy to imagine the heady atmosphere of France in the roaring '20s. Blues and the Charleston were almost as popular in the French capital as they were in the States. In this spirited tone poem Paris comes alive, allowing us to experience with the composer the curiosity of an eager tourist, the cacophony of honking taxicabs and the surprisingly prevalent influence of American jazz.

Daniel Bernard Roumain: *We Shall Not Be Moved: Symphonic Scenes and Samples*

Daniel Bernard Roumain

Born: December 11, 1971, in Margate, Florida

Composed: 2022, based on DBR's opera premiered in 2017 at Opera Philadelphia

World Premiere: These are the world premiere performances.

Duration: 14 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion [Player I: tam tam, bass drum, medium triangle, xylophone; Player II: bass drum, three tom toms, vibraphone; Player III Drum kit (snare drum, kick drum, hi-hat, ride-cymbal, crash cymbal) and maracas], harp, piano and strings.

Daniel Bernard Roumain—who goes by his monogram DBR—started playing violin at age 5 and soon became a musical omnivore. Before graduating high school, he had played backup for Ray Charles and Dizzy Gillespie. His musical talent got him to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where he earned a BM in music composition and theory in 1994. From there he went on to University of Michigan, studying with Michael Daugherty and William Bolcom, completing his masters and DMA in composition in 1999. He served for years as chair of the Music Theory and Composition Department and composer-in-residence at the Harlem School of the Arts, and remains a Visiting Scholar at Dartmouth College. Currently he is on the faculty of the University of Arizona's School of Music, Dance, and Theater.

Roumain is known for a dizzying array of musical pursuits around the country. He has ventured far beyond his classical training, exploring electronica, jazz, rhythm & blues, urban pop, hip-hop, gospel and traditional African American music. He has collaborated with artists as wide-ranging as minimalist composer Philip Glass, the experimental hip-hop musician DJ Spooky and singer/songwriter/pop icon Lady Gaga. He continues to play violin, both acoustic and electric, and his compositions have earned both recognition and acclaim.

Many of his works have dealt with sociopolitical topics, particularly issues of race. *We Shall Not Be Moved*, which takes its title from a spiritual that became an anthem during the civil rights movement, is a recent and

powerful example. DBR's opera, a collaboration with librettist Marc Bamuthi Joseph and choreographer Bill T. Jones, premiered in September 2017 at Opera Philadelphia. The opera examined the legacy of the 1985 MOVE bombing, in which a Philadelphia police helicopter bombed a residence occupied by the MOVE organization. The bomb ignited a fire that killed 11 people and destroyed 62 homes. The event traumatized the city and remains a livid scar in Philadelphia's recent past.

For the eponymous *We Shall Not Be Moved: Symphonic Scenes and Samples*, DBR has plumbed the operatic score and repurposed its contents for large orchestra. His composer's note explains:

The musical material has been recast into a dense, pulsating symphonic landscape where the operatic arias and choruses have been replaced with each section of the ensemble. The theme of the opera centered on the tragedy of the Philadelphia MOVE organization's confrontation with law enforcement, where children and adults lost their lives in a house fire: the building was bombed and set aflame in an attempt to extract them from their home. So the music begins and ends with sorrow, a plea from the brilliant Marc Bamuthi Joseph's libretto for us to all be ". . . capable of something better."

At the time of the premiere, librettist Marc Bamuthi Joseph said, "*We Shall Not Be Moved* tells the story of five kids who decide to learn from the ghosts that are living in the ashes of the MOVE house." DBR's symphonic score takes us on the young characters' tumultuous journey.

He acknowledges that he drew on "everything from Bach to Eminem. . . . The musical material for the opera actually, in many ways, began with thinking about Little Richard and even blues music." That musical diaspora is transformative in his orchestral canvas.

Various: *Surreal Sketches for Horn, Jazz Trio and Orchestra*

Vivian Li (born February 29, 1988, in Hong Kong)

Christian McBride (born May 31, 1972, in Philadelphia)

Paquito D'Rivera (born June 4, 1948, in Havana, Cuba)

Gary Morgan (born January 15, 1939, in Santiago, Chile)

Composed: 2020–2022

World Premiere: These performances are the world premiere.

Duration: 25 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, vibraphone, guiro, shekere, claves, glockenspiel, marimba, two bongos, solo horn, jazz trio [piano, bass, drum set], harp and strings.

When Christopher Komer was appointed the New Jersey Symphony's principal horn in 2017, he suggested the idea of commissioning a jazz French horn concerto with a twist: four movements, four composers and the addition of a jazz trio—piano, double bass and drum set—to the orchestra. Komer selected the composers in collaboration with Xian Zhang and the Symphony's artistic staff.

The terms of the commission specified orchestral instrumentation and approximate length, with one additional request: Komer asked each composer to find inspiration for his or her music in the art of the Spanish surrealist master Salvador Dalí (1904–89). A painter, sculptor, graphic artist and designer, Dalí was celebrated both for his personal eccentricity and for the often hallucinatory character of his work. Komer summarizes, “Dalí is simply one of my all-time favorite artists, and I have always been fascinated by the methods of the Surrealists and their manifesto. I knew these four movements would be very different from one another and wanted a common thread to connect them.” The musical result is *Surreal Sketches*, a composite concerto with four diverse approaches to Komer’s challenge.

Komer is unusual among horn players in that he has always been involved in the worlds of both classical music and jazz. “I thought, this concerto would give me a chance to show off what I can do in both arenas,” he says. The incorporation of the jazz trio to the orchestra was directly related. “Since I wanted to improvise, it was important to have a good rhythm section behind me,” he explains. The jazz trio further links these four movements to the jazz world.”

Vivian Li: “Galatea of the Spheres”

[See the Dalí painting.](#)

Obviously, each composer brings a unique perspective and personality to his or her music. Komer has been friends with Vivian Li for many years. A native of Hong Kong, she is now based in London, where she composes, teaches piano, and plays mandolin in a bluegrass band and a Gypsy jazz trio. As her point of departure, Li chose Dalí’s “Galatea of the Spheres,” a 1952 portrait of Dalí’s wife Gala surrounded by spheres that appear to be suspended in space. The spheres also suggest atomic particles, another of Dalí’s interests. Li has written:

Dalí had become interested in atomic theory at the time when he painted “Galatea of the Spheres” - a portrait of his wife and muse, Gala, composed of suspended spheres. I took inspiration from the work to create a musical imagination of a world made of nothing but tiny floating and dancing spheres, which are the foundation of all matter in the universe, big and small, living and non-living, ugly and beautiful.

Li’s movement begins with the jazz trio, relaxed and lilting, then steadily escalates tension. “I love the energy and intensity of Vivian’s music,” comments Komer. “It just keeps rolling and building. Her syncopations drives the piece forward, and her harmony moves in unpredictable ways. ‘Galatea of the Spheres’ is challenging, but also exciting and fun to play.”

Christian McBride: “Fried Bacon”

[See Dalí’s “Soft Self-Portrait with Fried Bacon.”](#)

Jazz bassist, composer and arranger Christian McBride is the only one of the four composers Komer did not previously know. “He has a big band and a jazz trio, and he’s won something like 8 Grammy awards,” he says. “But I also knew he was classically trained, and thought maybe he had not had an opportunity to write for full

orchestra. I gave him free rein.” McBride was drawn to Dalí’s “Soft Self-Portrait with Fried Bacon,” a 1941 canvas and one of his many self-portraits. Dalí described this particular painting as presenting his outer self: this was the glove, not the inner soul. Komer says that McBride’s movement, called simply “Fried Bacon,” swings. “It’s down-home and blues-y; a bit like going to church down South on Sunday—but also like a party,” he observes.

Paquito D’Rivera: “Dalí in the Tropics”

[Watch the chamber version with artwork by Omar Corrales.](#)

Komer and Paquito D’Rivera had previously collaborated on *Aires Tropicales*, a piece D’Rivera wrote for wind quintet that proved to be very successful. When they encountered each other backstage several years ago at the NJPAC gala, Komer described the jazz horn concerto project and invited D’Rivera to participate. D’Rivera opted for a different starting point: not a Dalí work, but rather a painting inspired by Dalí’s art. His composer’s note explains:

The French horn, a rather exotic instrument in the history of Jazz music, has among its most illustrious practitioners, legendary musicians like Julius Watkins, Willy Ruff, David Amram, John Clark and a few others, so I was so happy when the New Jersey Symphony commissioned me to write a piece for its principal hornist and great improviser Chris Komer. Gorgeously illustrated by the painter Omar Corrales for this reduced preview of the original orchestral piece, the work contains elements of the *Danzón* and other Afro-Cuban rhythms, and is inspired by an imaginary, dreamy walk by the Catalan painter Salvador Dalí through the forest of my homeland.

“Paquito’s movement is sublimely sophisticated in its tropical, intoxicatingly Latin way,” summarizes Komer.

Gary Morgan: “Metamorphosis of Narcissus”

[See the Dalí painting.](#)

Surreal Sketches concludes with Gary Morgan’s “Metamorphosis of Narcissus.” Now based in New York, Morgan is best known for PanAmericana!, a 20-piece Latin jazz band he founded in 1997—and in which Komer has played. “Gary writes very well for horn,” he comments, “and his original music has a strong Brazilian vibe.” Komer knew that Morgan had written a suite inspired by Paul Klee’s paintings, and thought that he would respond well to the Salvador Dalí challenge. Morgan obliged by delving deeply into the legend of Narcissus and Dalí’s hallucinatory 1937 painting, which doubles Narcissus’s figure with a large stone hand. Morgan explains:

I attempted to portray the Greek legend in a musical odyssey. The role of Narcissus is played by the French horn. We open with Narcissus, the young nobleman, enjoying his favorite pastime, hunting in the woods. There he is espied one day by the lovely nymph Echo, played by the flute, who is instantly smitten and tries, unsuccessfully, to entice him with her charms. She is devastated and seeks help from the goddess Venus, who lays a trap to lead Narcissus to a pool in the woods where he sees his reflection and promptly falls in love with his image. He reaches out to touch the face, to no avail. Time and again, he expresses his frustration, stops eating and eventually dies. Echo, meanwhile, retreats to

the mountains and is never seen again. The only thing she leaves behind is her voice – a real Greek tragedy!!

“Gary loves classical music,” adds Komer. “He’s got extensive experience writing for big band, but this was his maiden voyage in symphonic writing. He challenges my range on the horn. I love the improv section, where he uses full strings during my solo.” Morgan’s symphonic approach in “Metamorphosis of Narcissus” provides a thought-provoking conclusion to *Surreal Sketches*.

Aaron Dworkin/Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: *The American Rhapsody: Symphonic Variations on an African Air*

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

Born: August 15, 1875, in London, England

Died: September 1, 1912, in Croydon, England

Aaron Dworkin

Born: September 11, 1970, in Monticello, New York

Composed: 1906 (Coleridge-Taylor’s *Symphonic Variations on an African Air*); 2019 (Dworkin’s *The American Rhapsody*).

World Premiere: Coleridge-Taylor conducted the premiere of *Symphonic Variations on an African Air* on June 14, 1906, with the London Philharmonic Society in London. Dworkin premiered *The American Rhapsody* with the Minnesota Orchestra in October 2019.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances are the New Jersey Symphony premiere.

Duration: 27 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes (first doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, harp and strings.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (not to be confused with the English Romantic poet) was an Afro-British composer whose popularity in the early 20th century briefly eclipsed Edward Elgar’s. Born to a Black father from Sierra Leone and a white English mother, Coleridge-Taylor studied violin as a child, also singing in the church choir of Croydon. He enrolled at London’s Royal College of Music at age 15 as a violin student, but soon developed a keen interest in composition. The London firm of Novello published several of his anthems in 1891 and 1892. (He was all of 16.) He was soon accepted as a composition student of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, who was then at the forefront of English composition, and won a fellowship in composition at the College in 1893.

By the late 1890s, Coleridge-Taylor had taken up conducting, and his compositions were being performed regularly. He enjoyed remarkable success with several cantatas based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*. In early 20th-century Britain, the first of them, *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast* (1898) rivaled Handel’s *Messiah* and Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* in popularity.

Though his father returned to Sierra Leone when Coleridge-Taylor was a child and played little role in the boy's life, Samuel identified strongly with his African heritage, and regarded the dignity of the Black man as part of his artistic mission. Journeys to America in 1904, 1906 and 1910 strengthened this aspect of his music. Many of his later works incorporated Black themes.

Coleridge-Taylor's early works date primarily from his years at the Royal College of Music, before and during his study with Stanford. Like most British composers of his generation, Stanford had gone to Germany for his advanced study, and his music shows the influence of the Brahmsian school. Most of his students followed suit, but Coleridge-Taylor felt a stronger affinity with the music of Antonín Dvořák. He was particularly drawn to the works the Czech master composed during his time in America, which made use of Black spirituals and other American melodies.

His *Symphonic Variations on an African Air* is a prime example, based on the African-American spiritual "I'm troubled in mind." Widely considered to be Coleridge-Taylor's most ambitious and successful orchestral composition, the variations are spirited and engaging. He uses the orchestral color palette with skill and imagination, plumbing the harmonic possibilities of the song.

Aaron Dworkin chose Coleridge-Taylor's piece as the musical canvas for his spoken word, multimedia work *The American Rhapsody*. Dworkin selected the text from speeches and writings by George Washington: not only our nation's first president, but also a gifted military commander, patriot and entrepreneur who valued education and the arts.

Dworkin combined Washington's words with Coleridge-Taylor's music in a process he has dubbed "musetry." The narrative, which comprises both prose and poetic interludes, delivers America's story in Washington's words. Dworkin has framed it as a tribute to freedom, courage and other ideals, as well as addressing the moral stains inherent in our history. Dworkin has written:

As a multi-racial American, born to an African-American, Jehovah's Witness father a white Irish, Catholic mother while being adopted and raised by a white, Jewish couple, I could find no better setting in which to tell our American story. This work brings together the words of our white Founding Father, the music composed by a Black man of the nation from which he fought to free us, based on a song sung by the slaves whom Washington ultimately freed. I humbly pay tribute to our past and offer a sentiment towards our future with *The American Rhapsody*.

George Gershwin: *An American in Paris*

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York

Died: July 11, 1937, in Beverly Hills, California

Composed: 1928

World Premiere: December 13, 1928, at Carnegie Hall.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1971–72 season; Henry Lewis conducted.

Duration: 16 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba; alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones; snare drum, wood block, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, two tom toms, four auto horns, xylophone, glockenspiel, timpani, celeste and strings.

Vincente Minnelli's film *An American in Paris*, which starred Gene Kelly and introduced Leslie Caron, won the Academy Award for best picture in 1951. Gershwin's music provided the basis for its vibrant soundtrack, including such time-honored classics as "Embraceable You," "By Strauss," "Someone to Watch Over Me" and "Our Love is Here to Stay."

The ballet toward the film's conclusion, danced by Kelly and Caron as a dream sequence, provides the film's excuse for the 18 minutes of uninterrupted music we know as *An American in Paris*. Gershwin's score captures the naïveté of the innocent abroad and the joie de vivre of the world's most romantic city, right down to the din of its traffic.

A chronological conundrum

Gershwin died in 1937. How then could he compose a film score for a movie that came out in 1951? In this case, the music came first. Gershwin traveled to Paris in 1928 in order to acquire more formal training in composition. He himself was thus the American of the title. Even though he was already a great popular success on New York's Broadway stage, he wished to develop a command of traditional, classical techniques. To that end, he sought out the French master Maurice Ravel for advice and lessons. Recognizing the originality of Gershwin's musical voice, Ravel declared that he could teach the young American nothing.

Jazz and taxi horns in the roaring 20s

An American in Paris, which dates from 1928, is a valentine of sorts. After returning to the States, Gershwin told an interviewer: "This new piece, really a rhapsodic ballet, is written very freely . . . My purpose here is to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere."

Gershwin's music makes it easy to imagine the heady atmosphere of France in the roaring 20s. Blues and the Charleston were almost as popular in the French capital as they were in the States. In this spirited tone poem Paris comes alive, allowing us to experience with the composer the curiosity of an eager tourist, the cacophony of honking taxicabs and the surprisingly prevalent influence of American jazz.