



OMAHA  
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2021 - 2022 SEASON

# Bahl Conducts Beethoven 7

Friday, September 24, 2021 at 7:30 p.m. | Saturday, September 25, 2021 at 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, September 26, 2021 at 2 p.m.

Holland Performing Arts Center

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director | Aaron Diehl, piano

JOHN STAFFORD SMITH/WALTER DAMROSCH

*The Star-Spangled Banner*

SAMUEL WARD/ALFRED REED

*America The Beautiful*

JOHN ADAMS

*The Chairman Dances; Foxtrot for Orchestra*

GEORGE GERSHWIN

*Second Rhapsody for Piano & Orchestra*

Aaron Diehl, piano

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

*Out of the Silence*

Aaron Diehl, piano

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

*Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92*

I. Poco sostenuto - Vivace

II. Allegretto

III. Presto

IV. Allegro con brio

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## ***The Chairman Dances; Foxtrot for Orchestra***

John Adams

Born: Worcester, Massachusetts, February 15, 1947

John Adams is one of our nation's most performed and recorded living composers. Born into a musical family in Worcester, Massachusetts, he graduated from Harvard University in 1971 and moved to California where he taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and served as composer in residence for the San Francisco Symphony from 1979 - 1985.

Adams draws on music from a broad range of styles and periods, ranging from the 17th century Baroque (as in the haunting slow movement of his first Violin Concerto) to contemporary popular culture (many works). He describes *The Chairman Dances* (subtitled "Foxtrot for Orchestra") as an "out-take" from Act III of his opera, *Nixon in China*. A joint commission from the American Composers Orchestra and the National Endowment for the Arts, the *Dances* received their first performance in Houston in 1987, two years after their completion.

The score of the opera contains this description of *The Chairman Dances*: "Chiang Ch'ing, a.k.a. Madame Mao, has gatecrashed the Presidential Banquet. She is first seen standing where she is most in the way of the waiters. After a few minutes, she brings out a box of paper lanterns and hangs them around the hall, then strips down to a cheongsam, skin-tight from neck to ankle and slit up the hip. She signals the orchestra to play and begins dancing by herself. Mao is becoming excited. He steps down from his portrait on the wall, and they begin to foxtrot together. They are back in Yenan, dancing to the gramophone..."

Energetic, humorous, and redolent of the worlds of cabaret and Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers, the *Dances* unite nostalgia and irony.

## **Second Rhapsody for Piano & Orchestra**

George Gershwin

Born: Brooklyn, New York, September 26, 1898 | Died: Los Angeles, California, July 27, 1937

From the 1890s through the 1920s Paris was the undisputed center of bright, innovative culture, a magnet for American (and other) composers, artists, poets and tourists. George Gershwin was captivated by the charms of the City of Light; *An American in Paris* is his loving and nostalgia evocation of the sounds of the French capital. Gershwin, like many other visitors, was entranced by the raucous squawk of Parisian taxi horns and bought a set to incorporate into the colorful score.

If Aaron Copland represents the high point among American composers who developed along traditional lines, i.e., "serious" study within the classical establishment, George Gershwin is noteworthy for finding a different route to Carnegie Hall. He cut his musical eyeteeth not in the concert hall or operatic stage, but in the brightly lit music halls of Broadway. His popular/jazz origins permeate virtually everything he wrote, thereby incurring righteous opposition by many leading exponents of classical purity among critics and musicians of a "higher" persuasion.

When friends and colleagues began noticing strangely aberrant behavior from Gershwin in 1936, the composer sought psychiatric guidance, but his condition seemed to only get worse. He was ultimately diagnosed with a brain tumor, which took his life in 1937 and robbed the world of a genius whose greatest works may well have lain in an unfulfilled future.

In 1931, Gershwin composed music for a Hollywood comedy, *Delicious*, which took decades to reach its final form - and even to settle on a "permanent" title. Scored for piano and orchestra, the composer obsessed over such possible entries as *New York Rhapsody*, *Manhattan Rhapsody*, *Rhapsody in Rivets*, finally adopting *Second Rhapsody* (an obvious nod to his calling card, *Rhapsody in Blue*). Note that the jangling energy bespeaks more of urban traffic (akin to his *American in Paris*) than of rivets. The makers of the film pruned the movie score to less than its ultimate 15-minute length, which was premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under its indefatigable conductor and champion of American music, Serge Koussevitzky, in 1932. Arturo Toscanini passed on the opportunity.

Redolent of a classical concerto, the Second Rhapsody is laid out in the fast-slow-fast three-movement format. Broadway, both thoroughfare and attitude, are captured in the opening section, launched with an insistent trumpet motif, the so-called "rivet theme," as well as hints of Latin rhythms eventually found in the composer's Cuban Overture.

A brief piano cadenza introduces a patentable Gershwin bit of irresistible nostalgia heard from the violins. This music anticipates ideas from *Porgy and Bess* lying just a few years ahead.

The closing section recalls with added élan the "rivet theme" to exuberantly bring the jaunty affair to an end, though not before recalling its glorious predecessor, *Rhapsody in Blue*, with an appropriately over-the-top coda.

### ***Out of the Silence***

William Grant Still

Born: Woodville, Mississippi, May 11, 1895 | Died: Los Angeles, California, December 3, 1978

The current cultural climate has happily led to an increasingly rich emergence of classical (and other) music by Black composers, including William Grant Still, often described as the "Dean of Afro-American Composers." He left an extensive canon of some 150 musical works in various genres. Born in Woodville, Mississippi, he grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, with his mother and stepfather. The latter figure proved to be a formative influence on the child, imbuing a love of music through exposure to live performances of operetta supplemented by recordings of classical music on RCA's Red Seal line. Thus motivated, Still studied violin in his youth and eventually attended Wilberforce University in Ohio (originally established as an African-American school) where he conducted the band, learned several instruments and began composing and orchestrating. The range of his musical interests was as great as his rainbow background: African-American, Native American, Spanish and Anglo.

Though trained in musical modernism, he found his true voice in music that reflected his multi-cultural heritage. As a Black musician living and working in the Jim Crow Era, Still's entry into the predominantly white world of classical music had to take an indirect path before gaining acceptance. After World War I, he worked as an arranger for W.C. Handy's Band and later performed under Eubie Blake. By the late 1920s, his skills were becoming increasingly evident, and he composed and/or arranged music for the famous "stride" pianist, James P. Johnson, among other key musicians of that period. A key event took place in 1931 when Howard Hanson conducted Still's first major symphony with the Eastman Rochester Orchestra. Six years later, Still became the first African-American to conduct a major orchestra, namely the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

In 1940, Still composed *Seven Traceries*, from which his meditative *Out of the Silence* has enjoyed life as an independent piece. Originally written as a solo piano piece for his wife, Verna Arvey, Still rescored it to include an enveloping orchestral background that alternates and merges with the piano part. Both *Out of the Silence* and the original *Seven Traceries* are unforced mystical portraits of different aspects of God's sublime power.

*Out of the Silence's* sound-world floats high above as if casting a loving aura on God's creation. Gentle, ebbing chords in the strings move below a gorgeous solo line before yielding to the piano, which echoes and enhances the texture and mood. Soon the two "voices" join in this romantic and reflective music. The harmony is tonally enhanced by soft altered chords with added sixths. Give-and-take episodes flow serenely in which low string utterances add a sense of spiritual mystery.

### **Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92**

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born: Bonn, Germany, December 16, 1770 | Died: Vienna, Austria, March 26, 1827

As Europe shuddered in horror at the devastation wrought by the Napoleonic Wars, Beethoven spent much of 1811 and 1812 working out the details of his Seventh Symphony. Against the backdrop of the war, the composer - for all intents and purposes at the final, ebbing limits of his hearing - conducted its premiere as a benefit concert for the wounded Austrian and Bavarian soldiers who had fought against the Napoleonic armies. The audience was dotted with the musical notables of the day, including Ludwig Spohr, Antonio Salieri, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and an ample helping of other composers. All seemed to agree that the new symphony was a major achievement, a unanimity of opinion that reflected Beethoven's position as the great composer of his era.

Years later, Wagner called it "the apotheosis of the dance..." and this catchy description has stood the test of time. If we substitute "rhythm" for the more limiting "dance," we can appreciate even more fully the insight of Wagner's pithy observation, for no previous symphony by Beethoven or anyone else so elevated the role of rhythm as a source of tremendous generative power. A later commentator, John N. Burk, argued that the rhythmic élan of the Seventh Symphony explains the sense of grandeur of the work, a feeling of size and sweep that seems to transcend its 40-minute time span.

A slow introduction, *Poco sostenuto*, beholden to Haydn but far more weighty and expectant, yields to an engaging *Vivace* galvanized by the clever use of a single repeated note that serves as a transition and helps establish the unstoppable rhythmic fervor of the entire movement. Toward the end of the movement Beethoven adds another energizing element, an almost electric and obsessive phrase in the lower region of the orchestra.

The second movement, marked *Allegretto* but often performed as if it were an *Andante* (and indeed, Beethoven almost marked it as such), derives from a simple, much repeated rhythmic figure - akin to a funeral march - empowered by a gradual crescendo coursing through the entire movement.

The *Scherzo* is a vibrant study of dynamic contrasts and sprung, relentless rhythms, interrupted not once but twice by a Trio of relative calm, before the composer resumes his fervent romp to conclude the movement.

Breathlessly, the *Finale* picks up where the *Scherzo* ends, with further undiminished vigor and unbridled energy. Undulating notes in the basses and cellos in the final minutes add yet further power to this near-manic dash to completion.

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## Aaron Diehl, piano

Pianist and composer Aaron Diehl mystifies listeners with his layered artistry. At once temporal and ethereal, his expression transforms the piano into an orchestral vessel in the spirit of beloved predecessors Ahmad Jamal, Erroll Garner and Jelly Roll Morton. Following three critically acclaimed leader albums on Mack Avenue Records – and live appearances at historic venues from Jazz at Lincoln Center and The Village Vanguard to New York Philharmonic and the Philharmonie de Paris – the American Pianist Association’s 2011 Cole Porter fellow now focuses his attention on what it means to be present within himself. His forthcoming solo record promises an expansion of that exploration in a setting at once unbound and intimate.

Aaron conjures three-dimensional expansion of melody, counterpoint and movement through time. Rather than choose one sound or another, he invites listeners into the chambered whole of his artistry. Born in Columbus, Ohio, Aaron traveled to New York in 2003, following his success as a finalist in JALC’s Essentially Ellington competition and a subsequent European tour with Wynton Marsalis. His love affair with rub and tension prompted a years-long immersion in distinctive repertoire from Monk and Ravel to Gershwin and William Grant Still. Among other towering figures, Still in particular inspires Aaron’s ongoing curation of Black American composers in his own performance programming, unveiled this past fall at 92nd St. Y.

Aaron has enjoyed artistic associations with Wynton Marsalis, Benny Golson, Jimmy Heath, Buster Williams, Branford Marsalis, Wycliffe Gordon, Philip Glass and multi GRAMMY award-winning artist Cecile McLorin Salvant. He recently appeared with the New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra as featured soloist.

Aaron holds a Bachelor of Music in Jazz Studies from Juilliard. A licensed pilot, when he’s not at the studio or on the road, he’s likely in the air. Follow both his earthbound and aerial exploits via Instagram at [aaronjdiehl](#).



## Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

Ankush Kumar Bahl is currently the 13th Music Director in the Omaha Symphony's 100-year history. He is recognized today by orchestras and audiences alike for his impressive conducting technique, thoughtful interpretations, and engaging podium presence. In concert, he has left *The Washington Post* "wanting to hear more" and has been praised by *The New York Times* for his "clear authority and enthusiasm" and ability to "inspire." His recent guest conducting highlights include performances with the New York Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, Orchestre National de France, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México, the Richmond Symphony, Virginia Symphony Orchestra, Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, and the National Symphony Orchestra (Washington, D.C.). Summer festival engagements include the Copenhagen Philharmonic at Tivoli, the Sun Valley Summer Symphony, the Wintergreen Summer Music Festival, the Chautauqua Institute, and at Wolf Trap with the NSO.

Bahl is a proud recipient of four separate Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Awards between 2011 to 2016 and the 2009 Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy Scholarship (Leipzig). A protégé of former New York Philharmonic Music Director Kurt Masur, Bahl served as his assistant conductor at the Orchestre National de France, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. In addition, Bahl has been fortunate to count Maestros Jaap van Zweden, Zdenek Macal, Christoph Eschenbach, David Zinman, and Gianandrea Noseda among his mentors.

From 2011-15, Bahl was the Assistant Conductor at the National Symphony Orchestra under Christoph Eschenbach. During his four-year tenure, Bahl conducted over 100 performances, including his subscription debut in 2012, his Wolf Trap debut in 2013, the inaugural concert of the Kennedy Center Concert Hall's Rubenstein Family Organ, numerous run-out concerts for the NSO's In Your Neighborhood program, and his annual Young People's Concerts which educated over 24,000 students each year. In addition, Bahl was the primary conductor for their Beyond the Score series. In February 2013, Bahl's ability to step in on short notice was once again called upon when he successfully replaced Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos at a few hours' notice in a concert with the NSO that featured soloists Kelley O'Connor and Daniil Trifonov. Other soloists Bahl has collaborated with include Lang Lang, Sara Chang, Lara St. John, Karen Gomyo, Nicholas Drauticourt, Bhezod Aburiamov, Benjamin Grosvenor, Orion Weiss, Conrad Tao, Charlie Albright, Philadelphia Orchestra Concertmaster David Kim, and Concertgebouw Concertmaster Vesko Eschkenazy.

American born and of Indian descent, Ankush Kumar Bahl is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area and received a double degree in music and rhetoric from the University of California at Berkeley. He has been a conducting fellow at the Aspen Music Festival with David Zinman and completed his master's degree in Orchestral Conducting at the Manhattan School of Music with Zdenek Macal and George Manahan. In recent years Bahl has been a frequent collaborator with jazz legend Wayne Shorter, leading his quartet in concerts of his orchestral music at both the Kennedy Center and the Detroit Free Jazz Festival.