



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2023/24 SEASON

Wilkins Returns

April 19-20, 2024 | 7:30 p.m.

Holland Performing Arts Center

Thomas Wilkins, conductor | Alexi Kenney, violin

SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR

Ballade in A minor, Op. 33

JEAN SIBELIUS

Concerto in D Minor for Violin & Orchestra, Op. 47

I. Allegro moderato

II. Adagio di molto

III. Allegro; ma non tanto

Alexi Kenney, violin

INTERMISSION

WILLIAM DAWSON

Negro Folk Symphony

I. The Bond of Africa

II. Hope in the Night

III. O Le' Me Shine, Shine Like a Morning Star

ALEXANDER BORODIN

Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor*

This printed program is a condensed version.

For more info about the orchestra, guest artists, and the full program notes, download the Omaha Symphony app or scan this QR code with your mobile device.

*program subject to change





Thomas Wilkins, conductor

Devoted to promoting a life-long enthusiasm for music, Thomas Wilkins brings energy and commitment to audiences of all ages. He is hailed as a master at communicating and connecting with audiences. Mr. Wilkins is Principal Conductor of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra; the Boston Symphony's Artistic Advisor, Education and Community Engagement; Principal Guest Conductor of the Virginia Symphony; and holds Indiana University's Henry A. Upper Chair of Orchestral Conducting established by the late Barbara and David Jacobs as a part of that University's "Matching the Promise Campaign." He completed his long and successful tenure as Music Director of the Omaha Symphony at the close of the 2020/2021 season and is now that orchestra's Music Director Laureate. Other past positions have included resident conductor of the Detroit Symphony and Florida Orchestra (Tampa Bay), and associate conductor of the Richmond (VA) Symphony. He also has served on the music faculties of North Park University (Chicago), the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga, and Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond.

During his conducting career, he has led orchestras throughout the United States, including the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Cincinnati Symphony and the National Symphony. Additionally, he has guest conducted the Philadelphia and Cleveland Orchestras, the Symphonies of Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Baltimore, San Diego, Seattle, Louisiana, North Carolina and Utah, and the Buffalo and Rochester Philharmonics, as well as at the Grant Park Music Festival in Chicago to name a few.



Alexi Kenney, violin

Violinist Alexi Kenney is forging a career that defies categorization, following his interests, intuition, and heart. He is equally at home creating experimental programs and commissioning new works, soloing with major orchestras around the world, and collaborating with some of the most celebrated musicians of our time. Alexi is the recipient of an Avery Fisher Career Grant and a Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award.

Highlights of Alexi's 2023/24 season include appearing as soloist with the Dallas, Pittsburgh, and Milwaukee symphonies, leading a program of his own creation with the New Century Chamber Orchestra, and debuting a new iteration of his project *Shifting Ground* at the Baryshnikov Arts Center and the Ojai Festival, in collaboration with the new media and video artist Xuan. *Shifting Ground* intersperses seminal works for solo violin by J.S. Bach with pieces by Matthew Burtner, Mario Davidovsky, Nicola Matteis, Kaija Saariaho, Paul Wiancko, and Du Yun, as well as new commissions by composers Salina Fisher and Angélica Negrón. The album version of *Shifting Ground* will be released in June 2024.

In recent seasons, Alexi has soloed with the Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, l'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Detroit Symphony, Rochester Philharmonic, Indianapolis Symphony, Gulbenkian Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Oregon Symphony, Louisville Orchestra, and l'Orchestre de Chambre de Lausanne, as well as in a play-conduct role as guest leader of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. He has played recitals at Wigmore Hall, on Carnegie Hall's 'Distinctive Debuts' series, Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, 92nd Street Y, Mecklenberg-Vorpommern Festival, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Winner of the 2013 Concert Artists Guild Competition and laureate of the 2012 Menuhin Competition, Alexi has been profiled by *Musical America*, *Strings Magazine*, and *The New York Times*, and has written for *The Strad*.

Ballade in A minor, Op. 33

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

Born: August 15, 1875 – Holborn, London, England

Died: September 1, 1912 – Corydon, Surrey, England

Piece Length: Approximately 13 minutes.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, named after the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was a composer of mixed-race descent born to a white English mother and a Black father from Sierra Leone. In 1898, famed English composer Sir Edward Elgar was approached by the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester for a commission. Elgar was too busy to accept it and suggested they commission Samuel Coleridge-Taylor instead, writing “I wish, wish, wish you would ask Coleridge-Taylor to do it. ... [H]e is far and away the cleverest fellow going amongst the young men.” The resulting work, *Ballade in A minor*, was such a tremendous success that it launched Coleridge-Taylor’s career. His influence only grew with the beautiful cantata *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast*, which was so popular that for many years it was among the most performed works for choir and orchestra in England and abroad. In fact, Coleridge-Taylor’s fame led to an invitation by Theodore Roosevelt to visit the White House, then a rare occurrence for someone of African descent. Sadly, Coleridge-Taylor, who did not make a lot of money composing and struggled financially, died of pneumonia at the young age of 37. Commentators have suggested his death was partially caused by the stress of his financial situation, and *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast* would later be used as a case example to secure royalty rights for future composers and performing artists in England.

Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 47

Jean Sibelius

Born: December 8, 1865 – Hämeenlinna, Finland

Died: September 20, 1957 – Järvenpää, Finland

Piece Length: Approximately 33 minutes.

The first version of Sibelius’ Violin Concerto was written between 1902 and 1904 and initially dedicated to Willy Burmester, who loved the work so much that, upon receiving it, wrote to Sibelius “Wonderful! Masterly! Only once before have I spoken in such terms to a composer, and that was when Tchaikovsky showed me his concerto!” However, Burmester was not to give the premiere... nor the second premiere, as the combination of Burmester’s schedule and Sibelius’s writing – mixed with engaged soloist Victor Nováček’s lack of time to prepare – meant the premiere was a disaster. Sibelius spent the rest of 1904 revising the concerto, the second premiere was scheduled for October 1905, but yet again Willy Burmester was unavailable, and he was so offended by Sibelius’ disregard for his schedule that he refused to perform the work for the rest of his life. The premiere went instead to Karl Halir, and the dedication now went to a 12-year-old wunderkind named Ferenc von Vecsey, who would perform the work for the first time one year later and go on to be one of its earliest champions. Considered one of the most virtuosic concertos in the repertoire, the piece has been described as “mercilessly beautiful,” “a polonaise for polar bears,” and, on a serious note from musicologist Sir Donald Tovey, “... I have not met a more original, a more masterly, and a more exhilarating work than the Sibelius violin concerto.”

Program Notes

Negro Folk Symphony

William Dawson

Born: September 26, 1899 – Anniston, Alabama

Died: May 2, 1990 – Montgomery, Alabama

Piece Length: Approximately 35 minutes.

William Dawson showed academic and musical talent early on in his life, which exploded upon running away to attend the Tuskegee Institute. He would become the first Black student to receive a bachelor's degree from the Horner Institute of Fine Arts in Kansas City, earn a master's degree in composition from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, meet the great composer Florence Price, and teach at the Tuskegee Institute from 1930 to 1955. His work with the choir led to six weeks in New York City, helping open the brand-new Radio City Music Hall, and ultimately a meeting with Leopold Stokowski, the conductor who would champion Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* for more than thirty years. Stokowski conducted four performances of the work with the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1934, the success detailed in audiences erupting in applause after the dramatic second movement's conclusion and giving standing ovations when the symphony finished. Sadly, those would be the last performances of this magnificent work for decades, even after Dawson revised the symphony following a tour of West Africa in 1953. Theories for the symphony's fading from the standard repertoire range from a dearth of availability of scores and parts to the general dampening of music by Black composers that was rampant during the 20th century. *Negro Folk Symphony*, however, is experiencing a surge in programming – along with Dawson's fellow composer Florence Price – and has greatly benefitted from contemporary conductors championing it, a la Stokowski, once more. While Dawson acknowledged in interviews that composers have historically used folk music for symphonic themes – he used Tchaikovsky, Brahms, and Dvořák for inspiration, not emulation. In 1932 he said, "I've not tried to imitate Beethoven or Brahms, Franck or Ravel – but to be just myself, a Negro. To me, the finest compliment that could be paid my symphony when it has its premiere is that it unmistakably is not the work of a white man. I want the audience to say: 'Only a Negro could have written that.'"

Polovtsian Dances from *Prince Igor*

Alexander Borodin

Born: November 12, 1833 – Saint Petersburg, Russia

Died: February 27, 1887 – Saint Petersburg, Russia

Piece Length: Approximately 13 minutes.

Alexander Borodin was one of "The Five," a collection of nationalist Russian composers that included Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky, César Cui, and Mily Balakirev – but his day job was as a highly respected chemist. This left him only time on weekends to compose, yet he made significant contributions in the field of composition. His best-known works include three symphonies, two string quartets, the symphonic poem *In the Steppes of Central Asia*, and his opera *Prince Igor* from which these dances are extracted. The opera *Prince Igor* was based on the Russian epic poem "The Tale of Igor's Campaign," which tells of a failed raid by Prince Igor Svyatoslavich against the Polovtsians, a group of nomadic people from Central Asia. These dances appear at the end of Act 2, a concession of entertainment from Khan Konchak, the leader of the Polovtsian army, for Prince Igor and his sons. The result is an absolute barn-burner, and while *Prince Igor* may have faded into obscurity, the Polovtsian Dances remain – deservedly – a staple of the orchestra repertoire.