

PROGRAM NOTES
QUINCY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA, ILLINOIS
SEPTEMBER 28, 2025

Overture to Candide..... Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

The Overture to *Candide* is Leonard Bernstein's most frequently performed piece and has become a popular concert opener, lauded for its brilliance and enduring energy. Bernstein's comic operetta *Candide*, a musical adaptation of Voltaire's 1759 satirical novel, opened on Broadway in December, 1956. The show closed after just 73 performances, a serious failure by Broadway standards, but critics rightly noted a marvelous score. Bernstein and others – including Stephen Sondheim - persisted in attempts to rewrite, redecorate, and revive the show over the years, sometimes as an operetta, sometimes as grand opera. With each revival, *Candide* won bigger audiences, and in 1989, the seriously ill Bernstein spent his last days of vital energy recording a new concert version of the work. "There's more of me in that piece than anything else I've done," he said.

The overture for large orchestra combines famous tunes from the show, such as the frantic wedding music from "Oh, Happy We" and the virtuosic "Glitter and Be Gay" aria, with lively brass fanfares and prominent roles for percussion instruments such as glockenspiel, xylophone, and triangle, which add colorful highlights and intricate rhythmic texture. Bernstein's brilliant scoring, which captures the satirical spirit of Voltaire, is filled with both wit and moments of unexpected darkness. The music's exhilarating and bouncy character often features contrasting major and more foreboding minor melodic variations, mimicking the protagonist *Candide*'s constant series of unexpected misfortunes. With its fast pace, complex rhythms, and abrupt shifts in mood and key, the piece is delightful evidence of Bernstein's belief that "man's capacity for laughter is nobler than his divine gift of suffering."

~Compiled by Dr. Lavern Wagner (2010)

The world premieres of two of George Gershwin's most important concert works took place at Carnegie Hall. The first performance of his *Piano Concerto in F Major* on December 3, 1925, featured Gershwin as soloist and Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony Orchestra. Damrosch later led the New York Philharmonic in the world premiere of *An American in Paris* at Carnegie Hall on December 13, 1928.

Piano Concerto in F Major..... George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Following Gershwin's sensational premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue* a year earlier, Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Society commissioned Gershwin to compose a piano concerto. The *Piano Concerto in F* had a more "classical" character than Gershwin's *Rhapsody*, with a certain formal elegance, but also many of his trademark jazz sounds. There are punchy Charleston rhythms in the first movement, a bluesy theme in the second, and nods to ragtime in the third. Gershwin composed the concerto during the summer of 1925, in a tiny practice shack at the Chautauqua Institution in Chautauqua, New York. That December, he gave the work's premiere at Carnegie Hall.

The first movement is characterized by several changes in mood and tempo, a heavy reliance on the two main themes, and thick chordal writing for the piano soloist. The second movement, marked "Andante con moto," is intimate with a significant number of solos performed by the flute, trumpet, oboe, and horn. Jazz influence is abundant here, recalling melodic gestures directly from his *Rhapsody*. After a robust cadenza and a lyrical middle section, the piece seems to gain in intensity, only to fade away. The hustling and driving third movement marked "Allegro agitato" contains seemingly endless repeated notes and great rhythmic vitality. Ending with a transformed and romanticized return of the original piano theme from the first movement, this concerto effectively combines elements of American popular styles with classical approaches to form and the piano concerto genre.

~Dr. Curtis Pavey, University of Missouri

An American in Paris..... George Gershwin (1898-1937)

His reputation in the American musical world already established, George Gershwin went to Europe in 1928 for a vacation. His main destination was Paris, where he had aspirations of studying with the famous French composer, Maurice Ravel. While Ravel felt Gershwin had already found his musical language, and did not accept him as a student, the sights of Paris were making a lasting impression on Gershwin. His experiences resulted in the symphonic poem, *An American in Paris*. In writing this work Gershwin wanted to interpret the effervescence and gaiety of Paris, and to suggest an American's nostalgia for his own country as he strolls through "The City of Light."

The opening theme recalls an American walking jauntily along the Parisian boulevards, swinging his cane as he moves along. He is confused by rushing taxicabs, and we soon hear the distinctive squeaks of the Paris taxicab horns. Authentically, actual taxicab horns were used by Gershwin in his orchestration. Later, a beautiful blues melody depicts the American's homesickness. In its entirety, the work is vivacious, sprightly and frothy.

~Compiled by Dr. Lavern Wagner (1998)