

Masterworks 4 John Williams and Dvořák
Fort Wayne Philharmonic

PROGRAM NOTES

River's Rush

Kevin Puts

(b. 1972, St. Louis, Missouri)

When Kevin Puts became the first undergraduate music student to be awarded a Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he was already demonstrating that he had budding compositional talent of no common order. His subsequent achievements have more than lived up to that promise. Today, Puts is one of America's most prominent and popular classical composers, renowned for the beauty and emotional intensity of his music, which is not afraid to embrace the pleasures of compelling melodies and rich orchestral colors.

Though Puts has created purely instrumental works — four symphonies, tone poems, concertos, and chamber music — he has also displayed an extraordinary gift for writing for the human voice. His first opera, *Silent Night* written for the Minnesota Opera, won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Music. Commissioned by The Metropolitan Opera, his third opera, *The Hours*, will star Renée Fleming, Joyce Di Donato, and Kelli O'Hara and appear on the Met stage in 2022. A stunning multi-media work for voices and orchestra for Miss Fleming and Rod Gilfrey, *The Brightness of Light* was premiered by the Boston Symphony at the Tanglewood Festival in the summer of 2019. Inspired by letters written between two great American artists — painter Georgia O'Keefe and photographer Alfred Stieglitz — it was accompanied by a mesmerizing video of O'Keefe's paintings and Stieglitz's photos.

For its 125th anniversary in 2004, the Saint Louis Symphony invited the St. Louis-born Puts to create a dramatic work focusing on its significant geographical position at the meeting of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. The result was the highly dramatic *River's Rush*, premiered by the SLSO under Leonard Slatkin's baton at its season-opening concerts in September 2004. For that occasion, annotator Paul Schiavo created an official note for the work, which is excerpted here, with some additional comments.

“It seems fitting that in fulfilling a commission from St. Louis, a city that sits near the confluence of our nation’s two great rivers, Kevin Puts drew inspiration from the movement of water — its glinting color and texture, its surging energy — as it courses downstream. ‘I wanted to convey a sense of great, rushing energy,’ the composer explained ... ‘combined with a monumental, epic quality throughout.’ Most of the ten-minute piece proceeds at a fast pace. Mr. Puts observes that ‘there is a lot of activity at any given moment [but] the intricacy of these moments contributes to a broader sense of phrasing.’

“*River’s Rush* begins with bustling arpeggios, from which a simple [rising] two-note motif emerges from the orchestral bass [low brass and woodwinds] and eventually culminates in a ruminative duet between two clarinets [occurring midway through and ushering in a quieter, slower phase of the music]. ...

“ ‘There is a lot of variety when it comes to texture and color in the work,’ the composer notes. ‘Maybe I was thinking of the Mississippi (or any river for that matter), how its appearance can vary under different types of sunlight. Of course, this variety is achieved through the use of different combinations of instruments, but it also has to do with the chords I use. I took a new approach to harmony in *River’s Rush* by combining major and minor chords from different keys freely, almost as a painter would combine paints on a canvas. ... The result, I hope, is that all the music feels like it comes from the same source. There is variety but also economy.’ ”

Tuba Concerto
John Williams
(b. 1932, Queens, New York)

In America today, if you want to find the right man to create a score for a blockbuster movie, it seems nearly a requirement that you join the line to hire John Williams. A high percentage of the films that have been the highest grossing hits at the box office in the last 45 years have been scored by Williams, and he has received an astounding 52 nominations for Academy awards, winning five of the coveted statues.

However, there is another side to Williams' career that is less well known — his classical composing and conducting career. After serving in the Air Force, Williams moved from California to New York City to study at The Juilliard School, where he dreamed of becoming a classical concert pianist. Only after being overawed by the virtuoso keyboard competition, did he switch his studies to composition. And even as his Hollywood career took off, he continued writing concert music, including many concertos for esteemed soloists, including Yo-Yo Ma and as recently as last year for the German violin virtuoso Anne-Sophie Mutter and the Boston Symphony. From 1980 to 1993, he was the Principal Conductor of the Boston Pops and is still its Laureate Conductor.

In 1984, Williams was commissioned to write a work celebrating the centennial of the Boston Pops. In response, he chose to create a Tuba Concerto for its principal tuba player Chester Schmitz. As he commented: “ I really don't know why I wrote it — just urge and instinct. I've always liked the tuba and even used to play it a little. I wrote a big tuba solo for a Dick Van Dyke movie called *Fitzwilly*, and ever since I've kept composing for it — it's such an agile instrument, like a huge cornet. I've also put passages in for some of my pets in the orchestra — solos for flute and English horn, for the horn quartet, and a trio of trumpets. It's light and tuneful, and I hope it has enough events in it to make it fun.”

The Tuba Concerto follows the traditional concerto layout of three movements — fast, slow, very fast — played together without pause. **Movement one** rocks merrily along in an outdoorsy pastoral style, but later grows more serious and ruminative as the tuba begins a long solo section enriched by the mellow sounds of the horn quartet and continuing into a testing cadenza that briefly hints at the famous theme from Williams' score for *Superman* (1978).

An English horn joins the tuba's introspective reflections to begin the **second movement**. The English horn eventually yields to solo flute, and when the tuba reappears, a haunting dialogue ensues between these instruments, the polar opposites in the orchestra in terms of size, range, and color.

The brass section suddenly introduces a more recognizable version of the *Superman* fanfare theme to launch the **finale**. Urged on by pounding rhythmic patterns in the orchestra, the tuba rouses itself and shows us how fast it can move despite its size. But be sure not to miss a more subtle moment, as Williams contrives another odd-couple duet, this time between the delicate harp and the robust tuba.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, “From the New World”

Antonín Dvorák

(b. 1841, Nelahozeves, Bohemia (now Czech Republic); d. 1904, Prague)

At its premiere in the newly opened Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893, Antonín Dvorák's last symphony, “From the New World,” was perhaps the greatest triumph of the composer's career, and it has continued to rank among the most popular of all symphonies. Yet from its first reviews, commentators have asked the question: “Is this symphony really American?” In other words, how much is it “from the new world” and how much “from the old world”?

In 1892, Mrs. Jeannette Thurber, a devoted music patron and wife of an American multi-millionaire businessman, lured Dvorák to New York City to become director of her new National Conservatory of Music. She chose well, for not only was Dvorák one of Europe's most celebrated composers, but more importantly he brought fine teaching skills and an openness to the potential of American music. In his words, “I came to discover what young Americans had in them and to help them express it.”

A man who drew on his Czech peasant roots both for personal values and artistic inspiration, Dvorák found much to treasure in American folk traditions. While white Americans were inclined to undervalue the spirituals of black Americans, Dvorák was enraptured by them. One of his students was Harry T. Burleigh, an African American with a fine baritone voice who was to become an important arranger of spirituals and writer of American art songs. As Burleigh remembered, Dvorák “literally saturated himself with Negro song ... I sang our Negro songs for him very often, and before he wrote his own themes, he filled himself with the spirit of the old Spirituals.” It was those songs and the very sound of Burleigh’s voice that inspired the great English horn melody in the “New World’s” second movement.

With his sensitive antennae, Dvorák absorbed the vitality and brashness of America in the 1890s (“The enthusiasm of most Americans for all things new is apparently without limit. It is the essence of what is called ‘push’—American push,” he observed), and this spirit influenced his new symphony of “impressions and greetings from the New World.” The drive of the first and last movements as well as the syncopated rhythms and melodic shapes of many of the themes gave this symphony a unique voice. But, as Burleigh wrote, “the workmanship and treatment of the themes ... is Bohemian” — Dvorák is here, as always, the proud Czech patriot.

The **first movement’s** slow introduction hints at the principal theme, which, as the tempo quickens to *Allegro molto*, is introduced by the horns. Motto-like, this optimistic theme will recur in all movements. Listen for hints of the spiritual “Swing Low” in the second theme, a merry tune for flutes and oboes. A prodigal melodist, Dvorák also offers a third theme, bright and full of American “can-do” spirit, in the solo flute.

The **Largo slow movement** is one of the most beautiful Dvorák ever wrote. Here is the yearning melody for English horn, an instrument chosen by the composer because it reminded him of Burleigh’s baritone voice. The composer loved Longfellow’s poem “Song of Hiawatha” and claimed this music was inspired by the death of Hiawatha’s bride, but many, including Dvorák’s sons, heard more of his homesickness for his native land here. A poignant middle section in the minor presents two hauntingly wistful melodies for woodwinds above shuddering strings.

Dvorák also cited “a feast in the woods where the Indians dance” from Longfellow’s poem “Hiawatha” as influencing the **third-movement scherzo**. But it is far easier to detect European influences in this spirited dance movement, which summons memories of the composer’s greatest idols, Beethoven and Schubert — Beethoven for the opening recalling the Ninth Symphony’s drum-filled scherzo and Schubert for the ebullient trio section, sparkling with triangle.

The **finale** boasts a proudly ringing theme for the brass that propels its loose sonata form. But its development section brings back the first movement “motto” theme as well as the *Largo’s* English horn melody and a snatch of the scherzo. At the end, the home key of E minor brightens to E Major.

Dvorák's final magical touch in a loud, exuberant close is a surprise last chord that fades to silence.