Small Stage Symphonies II: Symphonic Folklore
Program notes by Dr. David Cole

Felix Mendelssohn: Symphony No. 4 in A major, Op. 90, “Italian”

One of the most fundamental urges of the human race is our propensity for travel. From accounts of tourism throughout the Roman Empire to Chaucer’s Canterbury Pilgrims to today’s glitzy advertisements for romance and adventure from Cancun to Kuala Lumpur, we seem to have an insatiable desire to explore our world.

From 1829 – 1831, Felix Mendelssohn, at the insistence of his wealthy and cultured banking family, embarked upon the traditional European “Grand Tour,” where young men and women spent their time viewing the landscapes, churches and museums of the great European capitals. His itinerary took him from the mists of northern Scotland to the sunny hills of Italy. In addition to his letters, sketches and watercolors from his trips (he was a talented visual artist), Mendelssohn’s souvenirs from his journey included some of his greatest instrumental music, including the overture The Hebrides (Fingal’s Cave) and two symphonies, the Scottish (No. 3) and the Italian (No. 4).

Italy seems to have thrilled all of Mendelssohn’s senses and completely captured his creative imagination. In late 1830, he wrote to his parents:

This is Italy! And now has begun what I have always thought... to be the supreme joy in life. And I am loving it. Today was so rich that now, in the evening, I must collect myself a little, and so I am writing to you to thank you, dear parents, for having given me all this happiness.

Shortly thereafter he began sketching out what would be his Fourth Symphony, though he would wait until he arrived back in Berlin to complete the work and give it its final form. We get a sense of his progress from the letter he wrote to his sister Fanny in February of 1831:

The “Italian” symphony is making great progress. It will be the jolliest piece I have ever done, especially the last movement. I have not found anything for the slow movement yet, and I think that I will save that for Naples.

Mendelssohn appeared to be in no hurry to finish the work when he returned home. The completion of the Italian Symphony had to wait for a commission from the London Philharmonic Society, who sent a request for a new symphony from Mendelssohn in 1833. The composer led the first performance in London in May of 1833.

The work is cast in the traditional four movements of the Classical symphony. The Allegro vivace radiates brilliant Italian summer sunshine from its opening bars, and its joyful spirits are only briefly dampened by a minor-key episode in the development section. The music of the slow movement, Andante con moto, which he told his sister he was “saving for Naples,” was inspired by a religious procession that he observed while visiting that city. The movement’s solemn, stately tread is only dispelled by two
interludes in a major key. The third movement, *Con moto moderato*, is more of an intermezzo than a minuet (though the tempo is similar), and the trio is punctuated by fanfares from the bassoons, horns, trumpets and timpani. The final *Saltarello* is the one explicitly Italian part of the work, with whirling string and woodwind figures dancing with relentless energy from beginning to end.

**Manuel de Falla: El Amor Brujo**
Aided by Thomas Edison’s early wax cylinder recorders, many young composers at the turn of the 20th century took an active part in collecting and preserving music from their countries’ oral traditions. Hungarian composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kókaly trekked through the mountains, plains and valleys of Hungary, Roumania, Bulgaria, Greece and the rest of eastern Europe, patiently recording and writing down the songs sung and played by those native peoples. Ralph Vaughan Williams tramped through the fields and fens of East Anglia, Sussex and Norfolk to preserve the ancient but vanishing traditions of English folksong, as did his contemporary Gustav Holst. In the United States, the uncompromising maverick Charles Ives set down his ecstatic visions of American folk and popular music in dissonant, modernist language that would be radical when his works were finally performed more than fifty years later. For all of these composers, the style of these folk tunes insinuated itself into the music they produced for the concert hall, deepening and enriching their own musical language.

In Spain, Manuel de Falla inhaled the aromas of Spanish folk and popular music (Andalusian *flamenco*, *zarzuela*, and the traditional *gitaña* music of Spain’s gypsies) and exhaled those influences in music that combined them with the harmonic, melodic and orchestrational innovations of Debussy, Ravel, Bartók, Stravinsky and Prokofiev. Born in Cadiz, Falla began his musical studies in piano and composition in his hometown and later honed his skills at the Royal Conservatory in Madrid. He moved to Paris in 1907, where he met Stravinsky, Paul Dukas, Pablo Picasso, the impresario Sergei Diaghilev and other artists and composers of the Parisian *avant-garde*. With the outbreak of war in 1914, Falla returned to Madrid.

The famous *flamenco* performer Pastora Imperio approached Falla to ask him to write a *gitanería* (a gypsy-style mini-musical) for her cabaret act that would feature her talents as both a singer and a dancer. Pastora had her mother, Rosario la Mejorana, sing for Falla and his lyricist, Gregorio Martínez Sierra, in order to give them some idea of the traditional spirit that she had in mind. Her mother’s singing was so passionate and persuasive that Falla and Sierra decided to expand the nightclub act into a ballet, *El amor brujo* (*Love, the Magician*), scored for small instrumental ensemble.

The initial performances of the work in 1915 were unsuccessful (though they did nothing to tarnish Pastora Imperio’s popularity). Falla began the process of revising the work for more traditional concert forces, increasing the size of the ensemble to a chamber orchestra, cutting all the spoken dialogue as well as three musical pieces, changing the order of the remaining music, and thoroughly revising the plot. Over the next decade, Falla created no less than nine revised versions of the work, with the final version only two-thirds of the length of the original. For publication, only two versions remain: the original *gitanería* of 1915 and the final one-act ballet for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra of 1925, the work we will hear this evening.
The plot of the ballet revolves around a supernatural love triangle: the young gypsy girl Candelas attracts the attention of the handsome Carmelo and wants to requite his love, but the jealous ghost of her first lover haunts her and continually interferes with their courtship. Candelas’ attempts to break the spell (including the famous “Ritual Fire Dance”) are all to no avail. Carmelo, growing frustrated with the specter’s interference, persuades his beautiful young friend Lucía to try to seduce the ghost and draw him away from Candelas until she and Carmelo can kiss. When they do, the ghost is finally exorcised and the spell is broken.

Aaron Copland: Old American Songs, Set 1
If the general listening public was asked to choose one composer who personifies America in the world of classical music, the choice of the majority would probably be Aaron Copland. After his initial studies in composition, Copland began his career as an avant-garde composer influenced by Debussy and Stravinsky. At the world première of Copland’s Symphony for Organ and Orchestra, the conductor Walter Damrosch introduced the piece and the young composer to the audience by remarking: "If a gifted young man can write a symphony like this at age 23, within five years he will be ready to commit murder."

Copland became dissatisfied with his compositional path and soon found stylistic inspiration in the folk and popular music from the entire width and breadth of the United States. From his early jazz-influenced urban portraits (Music for the Theater, Music for Movies, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra) to his later folk-influenced and Western-influenced ballets (Billy the Kid, Rodeo, Appalachian Spring) to his patriotic proclamations (Fanfare for the Common Man, Lincoln Portrait), Copland managed to capture the essence of the United States in music without descending into either pastiche or parody.

The two sets of Old American Songs come from a somewhat dark period in Copland’s life. Even during the 1920s, Copland had expressed sympathy for the working man, union labor and other left-wing causes, and these sympathies came into greater focus in opposing the Fascist movements developing in Spain, Italy and Germany in the 1930s. With the rise to power of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s, investigations into suspected Communist activity in America touched the lives of performing artists from Hollywood, Broadway, the visual arts and both classical and popular music. Copland himself was called before Congress in 1953 and asserted that at no time had he ever been a member of the Communist Party. At the same time, the rise of serialism and electronic music among younger European composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez may have signaled the death knell to Copland’s particular American brand of neoclassicism.

The Old American Songs are blissfully free of any of this personal turmoil. The first set was written in 1950 and first performed that summer in England, sung by tenor Peter Pears with composer Benjamin Britten at the piano. Copland’s collaborations with baritone William Warfield in performing these songs were so popular that the composer wrote a second set in 1952. Both sets were arranged for solo voice and chamber orchestra in 1957 and songs from the collection were later arranged for chorus and piano as well as chorus and orchestra.
For his texts, Copland browsed through materials from the Harris Collection in the Brown University library. In the library’s holdings, Copland found minstrel songs, spirituals, campaign songs, children’s tunes and religious hymns that portrayed the breadth and depth of the American experience. *The Boatman’s Dance* is a minstrel show tune by Daniel Decatur “Dan” Emmet; the song’s accompaniment mimic’s the sound of the banjo which typically would have accompanied the singer. The cynical political song *The Dodger* comes from the 1884 Presidential campaign but talks about far more than politics. *Long, Long Ago* is a sentimental ballad to an anonymous tune which was originally used in a blackface show. The Shaker tune *Simple Gifts* is another setting of the tune that Copland used in *Appalachian Spring* and his *Variations on a Shaker Melody*. The final song, *I Bought Me a Cat*, is a children’s nonsense song, with a new animal being added to the singer’s collection with each subsequent verse, the final animal being a new wife. The soloist is challenged to imitate the sound of each of the animals throughout the song.