# FEBRUARY 2, 2025

## Suite for Violin and Piano
## WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Born: 1895
Died: 1978
Composed: 1943

I. African Dancer
II. Mother and Child
III. Gamin

William Grant Still grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, where his mother was a schoolteacher. Still left college to pursue a career in music, and after service in the navy during World War I—moved to New York, where he worked with W.C. Handy, Paul Whiteman, and Artie Shaw. He also studied composition with two teachers who could not have been more unlike each other: the conservative Boston composer George Chadwick and the visionary Edgard Varèse. In New York, Still played the oboe in theater orchestras and was attracted to the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance, but in 1930 he moved to Los Angeles, which would be his home for the rest of his life. In Los Angeles, he worked first as an arranger of film scores but later devoted himself entirely to composition and conducting. Still was a trailblazer in many ways. He was the first African American to conduct a major orchestra (the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl in 1936) and the first to have an opera produced by a major opera company (*Troubled Island*, by the New York City Opera in 1949). His catalog of works includes nine operas, five symphonies, numerous other orchestral works, and music for chamber ensembles and for voice.

Still was passionately committed to African American causes throughout his life, and his *Suite for Violin and Piano*, composed in 1943, celebrates the work of three African American artists. The *Suite* was—like *Pictures at an Exhibition*—inspired by art in other forms, but where Mussorgsky was inspired by paintings and sketches, Still was inspired by the work of three African American sculptors. The first movement, *African Dancer*, is Still's response to a work of the same name by Richmond Barthé (1901–1989). Barthé made the early part of his career in New York City, where he was associated with the Harlem Renaissance. His *African Dancer* depicts a nude female frozen in motion as she dances, and Still's music captures the energy of her dance. After a declarative opening statement by the piano, the violin sails in energetically; a bluesy middle section, full of slides, leads to a return of the opening material and a euphoric climax.

Sargent Johnson (1887–1967) overcame a difficult childhood–he was sent to several orphanages, and he and his brothers were separated from their sisters when they were all very young. Johnson eventually made his home in San Francisco, where he worked as both sculptor and painter. He created a number of works titled *Mother and Child*, so the exact inspiration for this movement is uncertain. Still's movement has invariably been compared to a lullaby, but this lullaby does not remain soothing and quickly grows to an animated passage full of double-stops before winding down to its quiet conclusion.

Augusta Savage (1892–1962) also had a difficult childhood, and like Barthé she was associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Her *Gamin*, of painted plaster, depicts the head and shoulders of a boy of about twelve. He wears a cap and loose clothing and seems to stare out at the viewer with a slightly defiant air. Still's *Gamin* is a character study of the that boy, full of blues and sharply-syncopated rhythms. This movement—very short—has a particularly effective ending.

## Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, Op. 67
## DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born: 1906
Died: 1975
Composed: 1944

I. Andante
II. Allegro con brio
III. Largo
IV. Allegretto

The Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941 was the greatest catastrophe ever to befall any nation. In four years, twenty *million* Russians died, and the country sustained damage and suffering that no amount of time could fully repair. Shostakovich, then in his late thirties, reacted to the war with two quite different kinds of music. There was the public Shostakovich, who wrote the *"Leningrad" Symphony* and marches and songs. Patriotic and optimistic, these made the right noises for the time—and for the Soviet government. But the private Shostakovich recorded his reactions to these years in other music. The *Eighth Symphony* of 1943 and the *Piano Trio in E minor* of 1944 reveal a much less optimistic Shostakovich, one anguished by the war. This was not the kind of music a Soviet government committed to the artistic doctrine of Socialist Realism wanted to hear, and it is no surprise that performances of the Trio were banned for a time or that the *Eighth Symphony* was singled out for particular censure at the infamous meeting of the Union of Soviet Composers in 1948.

Two particular events in the winter of 1944 appear to have inspired this trio. The first came in February, when Shostakovich's closest friend, the scholar and critic Ivan Sollertinsky, died (the *Trio* is dedicated to his memory). The second was the discovery—as the Nazi armies retreated—of atrocities committed against Russian Jews. Shostakovich completed the *Trio* in the spring and played the piano at its first performance in Leningrad on November 14, 1944.

The very beginning of the *Andante*—an eerie melody for muted cello, played entirely in harmonics—sets the spare and somber mood of this music. The other voices enter in canon, with the main theme of this sonata-form movement a variation of the opening cello melody. The *Allegro con brio* opens with fanfare-like figures for the strings. This is one of those hard-driving, almost mechanistic Shostakovich scherzos, and its dancing middle section in G Major brings scant relief.

The stunning *Largo* is a passacaglia. The piano announces eight solemn chords that form the bass-line of the passacaglia, and there follow five repetitions as the strings sing poised, grieving lines above the piano chords. The concluding *Allegretto* follows without pause. This movement is said to have been inspired by accounts that the Nazis had forced Jews to dance on their graves before execution. Shostakovich does not try to depict this in his music, but the sinister, grotesque dance for pizzicato violin that opens this movements suggests a vision of horror all its own. Shostakovich makes the connection clear with the second theme, of unmistakably Jewish origin, for piano above pizzicato chords. The close brings back themes from earlier movements–the cello melody from the very beginning and the entire passacaglia theme–and finally the little dance tune breaks down and the music vanishes on quiet pizzicato strokes.

No wonder the Soviet government banned performances of this music! The *Trio in E minor* is unsettling music, more apt to leave audiences stunned than cheering, and it is a measure of Shostakovich the artist that he could transform his own anguish into music of such power and beauty.

## Verklärte Nacht (Transfigured Night), Op. 4

## ARNOLD SCHOENBERG

Born: 1874
Died: 1951
Composed: 1899-1902

*Verklärte Nacht* was one of Schoenberg's first successes, and it remains his most popular work. He wrote this thirty-minute piece for string sextet (string quartet plus extra viola and cello) in the final months of 1899, when he was 25, but could not get it performed. When he submitted it for performance to the Tonkunstlerverein, Vienna's chamber music society, the judges rejected it because the score contained a chord they could not find in their harmony textbooks. Referring to its unusual tonalities, one of the judges made a now-famous crack, saying that *Verklärte Nacht* sounded "as if someone had taken the score of Tristan when the ink was still wet and smudged it over."

*Verklärte Nacht* was finally performed in 1903 in Vienna by the Rosé Quartet. The leader of that quartet, Arnold Rosé, was Mahler's brother-in-law, and Mahler met Schoenberg at rehearsals for *Verklärte Nacht* and became his champion, though he confessed that some of Schoenberg's music was beyond him. The first performance brought howls from conservatives, but this music made its way quickly into the repertory. In 1917 Schoenberg arranged *Verklärte Nacht* for string orchestra, and he revised this version in 1943; at this concert, the music is heard in its original form.

*Verklärte Nacht*—the title translates *Transfigured Night*–is based on a poem of the same name by Richard Dehmel (1863–1920), a German lyric poet. The subject of Dehmel's poem may have been as difficult for early Viennese audiences as Schoenberg's music. It can be summarized briefly: a man and a woman walk together through dark woods, with only the moon shining down through the black branches above their heads. The woman confesses that she is pregnant, but by another man—her search for happiness led her to seek fulfillment in physical pleasure. Now she finds that nature has taken vengeance on her. The man speaks, and—instead of denouncing her—he accepts her and the child as his own: their love for each other will surround and protect them. The man and woman embrace, then continue their walk through the dark woods. But the night has now been transfigured, or transformed, by their love. The first line of Dehmel's poem—"Two people walk through bleak, cold woods"—is transformed in the last line: "Two people walk through exalted, shining night."

Musically, Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht* can be understood as a tone poem depicting the events of Dehmel's poem, and it falls into five sections: *Introduction, Woman's Confession, Man's Forgiveness, Love Duet,* and *Apotheosis*. *Verklärte Nacht* may look forward to the music of the twentieth century, but its roots are firmly in the nineteenth: the influences are Brahms (in the lush, dramatic sound), Wagner (in the evolving harmonies), and Richard Strauss (whose tone poems served as models). The music is dark and dramatic, and Schoenberg drives it to several intense climaxes. Particularly interesting are the harmonies: this music begins in dark D minor and evolves through troubled and uncertain tonalities to the bright D Major of the *Man's Forgiveness* and the concluding walk through the transfigured night.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger