

PROGRAM NOTES BY EDWARD LADA,
DIRECTOR OF ARTISTIC OPERATIONS, SAVANNAH PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

RHAPSODY IN BLUE AND THE FIREBIRD SUITE

SAVANNAH PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA WITH MARCUS ROBERTS TRIO

Saturday, April 6 at 7:30 pm

6:30 pm Pre-concert Talk presented by John

ALEXANDER BORODIN (1833–1887)

Polovtsian Dances (1874–5)

MARCUS ROBERTS (b. 1963)

***Rhapsody in D* (2016)**

INTERMISSION

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898–1937)

***Rhapsody in Blue* (1924)**

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882–1971)

***Suite from The Firebird* (1919)**

I. *Introduction*

II. *The Firebird and its Dance*

III. *The Firebird's Variation*

IV. *The Princesses' Round*

V. *The Infernal Dance of King Kastchei*

VI. *Lullaby (Berceuse)*

VII. *Finale*

Canarina and Savannah Friends of Music
Johnny Mercer Theatre

Savannah Philharmonic Orchestra

Marcus Roberts, piano

Joe Goldberg, alto saxophone, clarinet


Alphonso Horne, trumpet

Ron Westray, trombone

Rodney Jordan, bass

Jason Marsalis, drums

Polovtsian Dances (1874–5)

 Approximate performance time is 14 minutes.

 SMF performance history: SMF premiere

Alexander Borodin is best known in musical circles as one of Russia's "Mighty Handful," a group of composers creating a distinct Russian style of classical music which included Rimsky-Korsakov, Mussorgsky, Balakirev, and César Cui. However, music was never Borodin's primary career. His "day job" was as a doctor and chemist, holding a postdoctoral position in Emil Erlenmeyer's laboratory in Heidelberg. He is known in the scientific world as the co-discoverer of the aldol reaction (which is still today an important step in the process of synthesizing drugs like Lipitor). He was also a women's rights activist, eventually founding the St. Petersburg School of Medicine for Women.

The Polovtsian Dances are drawn from Borodin's opera, *Prince Igor*. In the opera, a Russian Prince (Igor) sets out to subdue the "savage" Polovtsians. Instead, Igor is defeated and captured; the Polovtsians perform a series of dances as entertainment, and eventually Igor and the Polovtsian leader come to respect each other as equals. Borodin worked for nearly two decades composing the opera, but it was still unfinished at the time of his death. It existed mostly as sketches except for a few completed sections, including the Polovtsian Dances. Borodin's friends Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Glazunov eventually completed the rest of the opera based on Borodin's sketches.

The Polovtsian Dances is a tour-de-force of Borodin's melodic genius, and serves as a thrilling climax to *Prince Igor's* second act. It was one of the first pieces performed by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris (the other was Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*), and its melodies can be heard throughout the musical *Kismet*—especially in the song "Stranger in Paradise."

Rhapsody in D (2016)

 Approximate performance time is 18 minutes.

 SMF performance history: SMF premiere

It was at the Ozawa Music Festival in 2014 that Seiji [Ozawa] first suggested that I write a new concerto for jazz trio and orchestra. Since Gershwin's music has had an important impact on my work with symphony orchestras, I decided to name the new piece *Rhapsody in D* as a kind of celebration of Gershwin's two most influential works for piano and orchestra—*Rhapsody in Blue* and the *Concerto in F*.

Rhapsody in D is a one-movement work with traits of a concerto, a rhapsodic spirit, and a "theme and variations" format. I use the bass and drums (the foundation of any American band) to help integrate the symphony orchestra with the piano and trio throughout the piece. My goal was to connect the jazz and classical genres using a modern compositional framework and a lot of spice and flavor from American and European cultures. My compositions often blend musical styles and *Rhapsody in D* is no different.

The introductory section of the work builds in harmonic density and textural intensity beginning with the low brass, then rises in volume and timbre throughout all sections of the orchestra, resolving to the statement of the first theme by the piano, and then by the orchestra, in D Major. The first theme with its flowing *cantabile* melody contrasts with the lively and buoyantly frivolous second theme in F minor, which features a playful dialogue between the piano, strings, and woodwinds.


There are a series of variations on both themes starting with a vivacious conversation between piano and orchestra in the form of a short minuet, influenced by Prokofiev and Stravinsky. The next two variations, buoyed by the sophisticated lilting swing of the trio, are influenced by the blues and syncopated rhythms of the legendary jazz pianist, Erroll Garner, while the slow and beautiful fourth variation is reminiscent of Maurice Ravel.

Variation five brings back the first theme to showcase the orchestra as a joyous New Orleans street parade ensemble, complete with the traditional configurations of trumpet, clarinet, trombone, and tuba. Variations six and seven bring me back to my church roots in an exploration of gospel music combined with an earthy blues feeling. Finally, the eighth variation brings back the New Orleans ensemble, with the addition of more strings and woodwinds supporting the melody.

Playing any music at a high level is not an easy task. Playing jazz music well requires creative imagination combined with great skill in interactive group improvisation, blues playing, quick reflexes, good instincts, tremendous virtuosity, and the ability to synthesize these skills into a cohesive, unique personal style, vocabulary, and sound. This syncopated music is built upon the democratic principles of cooperation, individual self-expression and self-sacrifice, and a shared group purpose. At its best, the music is infused with the genius of its creators—men and women who gave up much to create and develop this great art form, based on the ingredients of inclusion, self-respect, equality, individual freedom, and a cultural aesthetic that guarantees its relevance for future generations.

- notes excerpted from the composer,
Marcus Roberts

Rhapsody in Blue (1924)

 Approximate performance time is 17 minutes.

 SMF performance history: 4/02/04

George Gershwin is now deservedly regarded as one of the most iconic American composers of the early 20th century. However, in 1924 he was a relatively unknown Tin Pan Alley musician, making a living recording player piano rolls and writing songs for vaudeville and Broadway shows. That changed in later that year, when bandleader Paul Whiteman decided to create an all-jazz concert event he called “An Experiment in Modern Music.” His goal was to create a bridge for “the masses” to gain an understanding and appreciation of the symphony and opera.


Whiteman asked Gershwin to compose a concerto-like piece for the concert on short

notice. Gershwin reluctantly agreed. Fortunately, inspiration struck while Gershwin was traveling to Boston. “It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang... And there I suddenly heard, and even saw on paper—the complete construction of the rhapsody, from beginning to end... I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness.”

Rhapsody in Blue was the result. The piece was completed just eight days before its premiere, so some of the piano part was unwritten, to be improvised by Gershwin on the spot. Whiteman's score had a hastily scribbled note reading “wait for nod” during one of the solo piano sections. The iconic opening clarinet glissando was added by clarinetist Ross Gorman during rehearsal as a joke, but Gershwin was struck by the sound and asked Gorman to keep the addition.

The influence of Gershwin's piece was immediate—Whiteman's concert on February 12, 1924 was attended by musical luminaries such as Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Rachmaninov, Leopold Stokowski, and John Philip Sousa. Gershwin was marked as an important new voice in American music, and *Rhapsody in Blue* quickly earned him recognition as a composer to be taken seriously.

Suite from *The Firebird* (1919)

 Approximate performance time is 22 minutes.

 SMF performance history: SMF premiere

The final piece of our quartet of musical innovations tonight is once again intimately connected to Sergei Diaghilev. The ballet impresario, in his quest to define a new, 20th century style of music and dance, happened upon a performance of a short piece titled *Fireworks* by a still relatively unknown 28-year-old Igor Stravinsky. Diaghilev commissioned Stravinsky to write *The Firebird* for his Ballets Russes—the first ballet the young company would perform to a new piece of music.

The Firebird was an immediate success at its premiere in 1910, earning ecstatic praise from critics for the incredible synthesis of Stravinsky's vivid score and Fokine's evocative choreography. Its success led Diaghilev to quickly commission

two more ballets from Stravinsky: *Petrushka*, which some scholars claim is the piece where “Stravinsky at last became Stravinsky,” and *The Rite of Spring*, a revolutionary piece that Aaron Copland referred to as “the foremost orchestral achievement of the 20th century.”

Unlike his later works, Stravinsky's style in *The Firebird* is still very connected to Russian classical traditions, and is stylistically similar to works by Stravinsky's mentor, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Stravinsky created three different suites of music from *The Firebird* for concert presentations over the years, each with slight revisions to the work in concert. The most popular is the 1919 version being performed tonight.