

“The Block”
2019
Carlos Simon

Carlos Simon’s “The Block” is a short orchestral work based on the visual art of Romare Bearden. Though Bearden was born in North Carolina, he spent most of his life in Harlem, the inspiration for most of his artwork. “The Block” is made up of six paintings highlighting different buildings in one Harlem block. The composer Simon used various musical textures to highlight the different aspects of city life as Bearden used different mediums in his art like watercolors, graphite, and metallic papers. “The Block” serves as a musical tribute to the enduring legacy of African American culture and city life.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/481891>

Concerto No. 1 in C Minor for Trumpet
1948
Vladimir Peskin

Vladimir Peskin’s life was marked by hardship, yet his compositions, particularly his works composed for influential trumpeter Timofei Dokschitzer, shine with virtuosity. Peskin's concerto both pushes the technical limits of the instrument and beautifully represents its essence. The soloist and orchestra breathe life into Peskin's concerto, paying homage to the collaboration between composer and virtuoso that led to its creation.

Through intricate melodies and dazzling virtuosity, the energetic first movement, “Allegro con fuoco,” showcases Peskin's skillful composition as the soloist navigates through a landscape of musical colors and textures, supported by the orchestra’s accompaniment. Through its masterful blend of technical brilliance and emotional depth, the concerto continues to captivate audiences and inspire performers, cementing the concerto as a staple of the repertoire.

The Violin Concerto in D Minor Op. 47
1903-1905
Jean Sibelius

Sibelius once commented on the final movement, “It must be played with absolute mastery. Fast, of course, but no faster than it can be played perfectly from beginning to end.” Those anticipating a dazzling finale rich with violinistic fireworks will find their expectations met; this movement stands as one of the most demanding and exhilarating pieces composed for the violin.

It begins with a lively theme in 3/4 time. The soloist soars while the orchestra introduces a new motif—a robust, foot-stomping melody that led the eminent British music critic Donald Tovey to dub the movement a “polonaise for polar bears.” The violin responds with rhythmic syncopation. It evolves into a rendition of the theme for the violin, showcasing dazzling double and triple stops. Further displays of virtuosity intensify, leading back to the initial theme first presented by the orchestra, then echoed by the soloist. The “polonaise for polar bears” makes a return, now adorned with high violin harmonics, producing ethereal notes achieved by delicate contact with the strings. The virtuosic displays escalate as the music surges toward the concerto's culmination.

American Salute
1943
Morton Gould

Morton Gould's "American Salute" is a stirring orchestral work that pays homage to the beloved American folk song "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." Originally composed in 1942 during World War II, Gould's arrangement captures the patriotic spirit and resilience of the American people during times of conflict. The piece opens with the familiar melody of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," presented in a bold and triumphant fashion by the brass section. Gould then weaves variations on this theme throughout the composition, exploring a range of moods and textures, from jubilant fanfares to tender, reflective passages, reflecting the highs and lows of the American experience. The dynamic interplay between sections of the ensemble showcases the depth and versatility of Gould's arrangement while paying homage to the rich musical traditions of the United States. Through "American Salute," audiences are invited to celebrate the enduring spirit of America and reflect on the sacrifices made by those who have served their country. Gould's masterful arrangement serves as a fitting tribute to the indomitable resolve of the American identity.

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story
1960
Leonard Bernstein

Leonard Bernstein composed the groundbreaking musical "West Side Story," a creation that would cement his legacy. Bernstein himself took nine segments from the score, weaving them into what would later be known as the Symphonic Dances. The orchestral suite made its debut at a "Valentine for Leonard Bernstein" gala concert, conducted by Lukas Foss with the New York Philharmonic, on February 13, 1961, serving as a vital fundraiser for the orchestra's pension fund.

The Symphonic Dances consists of both classical American popular music styles. At its heart lies the iconic melodic motif of "Maria" (C-F sharp-G), distinguished by its unmistakable tritone interval. Echoing the unresolved tension of the musical's narrative, the suite concludes with an evocative chord featuring the same interval, leaving audiences lingering on the edge of anticipation.

The seamless integration of dance elements into the fabric of "West Side Story" posed a unique challenge in transposing the music to the concert stage. Bernstein's orchestrations contain vibrant instrumental combinations and an expansive percussion section, the orchestra members themselves add color with shouts of "Mambo!" The orchestrations not only enhance the kinetic quality of the music but also subtly shift the narrative focus from a mere love story to the visceral conflict between rival gangs. Through the Symphonic Dances, listeners are transported into the visceral world of the Jets and the Sharks, where fleeting moments of utopian aspiration collide with the harsh realities of urban strife, crafting a compelling narrative arc that resonates deeply with audiences.