

## **Keith Gates (1948–2007), *Evangeline* (1995)**

This concert is the premiere of William G. Rose's orchestral transcription of sections from Keith Gate's opera *Evangeline*. A long-time resident of Lake Charles as well as a beloved professor of composition at McNeese State University, Keith Gates and his music continue to be familiar favorites in Southwest Louisiana. Gates began his musical education at the prestigious North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem. Undergraduate and graduate studies at Julliard under Vincent Persichetti left a distinct impression upon his style. At a time when much classical music turned to the difficult and dissonant sounds of the avant-garde, Gates, like Persichetti, instead worked to write accessible music on themes to which audiences could closely connect. Although he wrote works for orchestra, much of his music was for a chamber setting and also conceived with his friends and colleagues at McNeese in mind. Indeed the majority of his works were premiered in Lake Charles. His operas, nine in all, might be considered his largest and most significant works. Among these, *Tom Sawyer* (1983) is the only one that uses the traditional three acts, while the one-act *The Christmas Coin* (1999) and two-act *Evangeline* (1995) have been revived a number of times in the area and elsewhere.

*Evangeline* deals with the Acadian exile from Nova Scotia to central Louisiana ca. 1755. In 1755 some 6,000 French settlers were deported from Canada to Louisiana in the wake of the French and Indian War which saw the transfer of the French holdings in Canada to Britain. The opera begins with a prologue as Cajun descendants gather to retell the story of their arrival in Louisiana. The horn and clarinet engage in a dialogue with the chorus ("This is the forest primeval") that is at once sorrowful and optimistic. The leaping intervals and open harmonies show the distinct influence of Persichetti and other twentieth-century American composers, such as Aaron Copland.

The first act of *Evangeline* sees the preparations for the title character's marriage in small-town Nova Scotia. In scene one Gates sets the anticipation of the day before the wedding. Scene two is the wedding itself, which is tragically interrupted by British soldiers who order the entire town to leave by the end of the day. Gabriel, the groom, together with Evangeline's father and others resist and are arrested. In scene three the deportees await their ship, Gabriel pleads that Evangeline wait for him and she says she will. The act closes with the death of Evangeline's father and the burning of their homes. Gates's music is largely tonal and could be classified as neo-classical in the same way as many mid-century American composers. The impassioned "Ave Maria" sung by Evangeline near the end of the act shows Gates's unique mixture of modern harmonies, beautiful melody, and historical devices.

Act two finds the Acadians in Bayou Teche, Louisiana three years later. It opens with a mournful prelude in the swamp. In scene one Evangeline finds herself courted but refuses to give up hope that somehow she and Gabriel will be reunited. Gabriel, who ends up in a nearby village, is unsuccessful in finding her. In scene two Evangeline finds Gabriel's best friend, who relates how Gabriel had just given up and left Louisiana for good. Scene three occurs decades later, as Evangeline cares for victims of the yellow fever. Gabriel is among them and the two are reunited at last. While the reunion is tragically short-lived given his illness, they rekindle the emotions of their interrupted wedding night so long ago. A short Epilogue returns to the storytellers of the present, and the eternal interplay between the "disconsolate" ocean and the wailing forest.

### **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827), Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, op. 58 (1807)**

This work surely was one of Beethoven's favorites. He premiered it in a private concert in 1807 for patron Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz, along with the premieres of the *Coriolan Overture* and the Fourth Symphony. The next year was an even bigger deal—the public premiere. Imagine a concert conducted by Beethoven and with Beethoven at the piano bench, featuring four brand new works by the same (this work, the Choral Fantasy, and the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies). That was the real program at a concert held just before Christmas of 1808!

Beethoven's final piano concerto—not by design but rather because of the looming deafness that would bring his career as a performing pianist to an abrupt end—opens in unusual fashion with hesitant chords played by the soloist. The movement, indeed all of the concerto's movements, present Beethoven's pastoral rather than his heroic style. The lyric second movement leads directly into the finale.

### **Johannes Brahms (1833-97), Symphony No. 4 in E minor, op. 98 (1885)**

It has been said that for Brahms writing a symphony was a “matter of life and death.” With the Fourth Symphony we encounter his final effort in the genre—the master presented at perhaps his greatest. As a composer, he lived equally in the past and the present. The advanced harmonies of the work, revolving around E and C, focus on the thirds (or mediant) relationships that were typical at the time. That he sees the two keys as unified becomes apparent in the first movement's recapitulation, where an expected return to E minor is actually transformed to C major as a moment of breakthrough. Brahms's most important contribution to compositional style was his use of “developing variation.” That is, his initial ideas constantly evolve and change in small yet distinct ways over the course of the entire work. His themes are never static: they grow organically from a seed to a sapling to a tree that finally itself creates new seeds that perpetuate the cycle.

Much of Brahms's enduring passion for music history can be heard in the Fourth Symphony. The opening theme, with its lilting and leaping gestures in minor, might just as easily have sprung forth from the mind of J. S. Bach. It is poignant and majestic, yet also solemn and tragic like the movement it presages. Brahms somehow avoids the temptation to write a fugue based on the melody. The second movement commences with a solo horn playing a melody in the old Phrygian mode of centuries past. Notice how his thematic idea is merely a dotted rhythm and a small leap—a simple idea worthy of Beethoven—yet this forms the basis of not only the theme that follows, but the entire movement. This is Brahms's developing variation at its finest. The character of the theme is remarkably similar to that of the first movement, even as what follows ends up more as a quasi-idyllic moment of repose. The third movement is a scherzo—a jest or play—and perhaps is best described as frolicking in much the same way as many of Beethoven's scherzos even if Brahms is more prone to keeping a straight face in his playfulness than his musical forefather. Perhaps here we see a bit of Brahms's passion for Haydn.

The fourth and final movement opens with one of the most famous chord progressions ever written. The harmonies progress across thirds, hence its cadence sounds odd and yet appealing at

the same time. This movement is written as a passacaglia: the Baroque form in which a thematic idea, usually in the lowest voice, repeats in meditative fashion across the entire movement. Again Brahms has turned to Bach, but there are notable differences too. The passacaglia bass is actually derived from the unlikely top voice of the opening chord progression. The variations that follow do not repeat the idea obviously unless you are reading the score itself. Instead Brahms masterfully hides the theme's presence in a way that demonstrates his artistry and vision for its infinite possibilities. By the time the opening idea returns verbatim for the recapitulation the listener has already experienced over twenty iterations of the bass line! From that point on, the passacaglia theme becomes more pronounced and insistent as it struggles to resolve the entire symphony's outstanding issues. The ending is not triumphant so much as it is resolute.

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