

PROGRAM NOTES – October 16, 2011
by Steve Anthenien

Robert Russell Bennett - Suite of Old American Dances

Presented today in the composer's 1950 orchestral adaptation, *The Suite Of Old American Dances* was originally written for concert band in 1949. It is considered one of the finest works produced by an American composer for that genre.

Robert Russell Bennett (1894-1981) is best known for his work as an arranger and orchestrator of Broadway shows such as *Oklahoma!*, *Showboat*, *The Sound of Music*, *Camelot*, *My Fair Lady*, television and motion pictures, but he was a prolific composer in his own right, writing concerti, symphonies, art songs, chamber music, operas, incidental music for stage plays, along with music for concert band.

Bennett was born in Kansas City, Missouri, where his father was a member of the Kansas City Symphony and his mother played piano professionally and maintained a piano studio. His first music teachers were his parents, and by his early teens, was playing a variety of instruments in a concert band his father had organized.

Bennett moved to New York City in 1916 and found work as a music copyist. His responsibilities soon expanded to arranging and orchestrating as he made connections with some of the most popular Broadway composers, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Kurt Weill, Jerome Kern, and Richard Rodgers among others. Some of the composers passed music to Bennett that needed little more than an orchestration, while others depended on Bennett to bring a bare melody to completion. Richard Rodgers said of Bennett, "I give him the credit for making my music sound better than it was."

In spite of his popular successes, Bennett sought acceptance as a serious composer. Of a large body of finely written music, Bennett is best known for a series of pieces he wrote for concert band in the 1940s and 1950s. After hearing the Goldman Band perform in 1948, he was inspired to write the *Suite of Old American Dances*. Originally titled *Electric Park* after an amusement park he visited as a child in Kansas City, the music recalls dance forms popular at the beginning of the twentieth century.

1. The first movement, *Cakewalk*, revives a dance with origins in the antebellum South. Invented by African-American slaves and originally called the "prize-walk," it would parody the mannered dance forms they would observe at their masters' social events. It soon became highly competitive, and only the most agile and accomplished dancers would compete. It was demonstrated at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the winners receiving a huge cake. It was known thereafter as the "cakewalk," and became a popular feature of minstrel shows.

2. *Schottische* isn't Scottish as the name might suggest, but is actually a polka-like dance originating in Bohemia, the modern-day western half of the Czech Republic. It is one of the oldest dance forms and shares a four-beat pattern with the polka, but on the fourth beat of each pattern a polka dancer will rest, while schottische dancers perform a hop.

3. The *Western One-Step* is a type of early ballroom dance that preceded the foxtrot. This quick dance becomes breathless in Bennett's update of the form.

4. *Wallflower Waltz* is a relaxed, jazzy treatment of the classic three-beat dance form. Bennett utilizes sophisticated tone color combinations and syncopation to give the music a contemporary (for 1949) sound.

5. *Rag*. A syncopated style of music originating in the 1890s, "rag" evolved from blending the traditional two-beat march with Afro-Caribbean rhythms. The syncopation in the music was first referred to as "ragged time," then the form itself began to be called "ragtime," and finally, "rag." First popularized by predominantly African-American composers, most notably Scott Joplin, the rag soon entered the musical mainstream, and was adopted by composers like Satie, Debussy, and Stravinsky. Bennett's sassy *Rag* is a brilliant finale.

Robert W. Smith - Symphony No. 2 (The Odyssey)

Robert W. Smith (1958-) is one of the most prolific composers of band and orchestra music in the United States today. He has over six hundred compositions in print, his music being rehearsed and performed by groups ranging in ability from beginner to professional. His dramatic style of writing has made him a favorite of performers and audiences alike.

Mr. Smith is a professor in the Music Industry Program at Troy University in Troy, Alabama, and serves as Vice-President for Product Development for C.L. Barnhouse Music Publishing and Walking Frog Records. As a conductor and clinician, Mr. Smith has performed worldwide, and his music has been featured in numerous motion pictures and television programs.

The Iliad and *The Winds of Poseidon* are the first two movements of Smith's *Symphony #2-The Odyssey*, composed in 2006-2007, and inspired by Homer's epic poem.

The Iliad describes Odysseus, King of Ithaca, as he prepares for battle and sails toward the city-state of Troy. The listener can hear the ram's horn begin the adventure. Sounds of battle follow, with agitated melodic patterns played by the woodwinds and strings, and bold fanfares by the brass. Special percussion effects simulate the squeaking wheels of the Trojan Horse being pushed into the city, and the sounds of fire as Troy burns to the ground.

The Winds of Poseidon follows Odysseus' voyage home. Having angered Poseidon, Odysseus and his crew have to endure strong winds and high seas as they struggle to stay on course. Swirling melodic lines depict the pitch and sway of the boat. Finally, the music sails into calm

seas, and the sirens come into view. Some of our instrumentalists become singers for a while, providing a gentle accompaniment for the sirens' plaintive melody. The music soon returns to the wild sea, building to a thunderous climax.

Paul Creston - Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra

Paul Creston (1906-1985), born Giuseppe Guttovoggio in New York City, is considered one of America's premier composers, with a body of work including music for piano, voice, chamber groups, concert band, and orchestra.

Showing an early interest in music, Creston was enrolled in piano lessons at eight, and taught himself to play his brother's violin. Family financial problems led Creston to leave high school in his third year, and he worked a succession of jobs while taking classes in English, foreign languages, mysticism, composition, piano, organ, and orchestration. He established a career as an organist, and despite a lack of formal training, also spent thirty-five years as a professor of music at a succession of colleges and universities.

When Creston decided to focus on composition in the early 1930s, he enjoyed relatively quick success. His compositions were among the most performed pieces of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, and tended to feature a strong rhythmic sense and changing meters (alternating sizes of beat groupings), though within a traditional compositional framework. Creston chose to write for a number of "neglected" instruments, including marimba, trombone and accordion, and wrote three works for saxophone, *Sonata*, *Rapsodie*, and *Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra*.

The saxophone, invented circa 1840 by Belgian instrument maker Adolphe Sax, was quickly adopted by military bands due to its power, versatility, and fine tone quality. The French National Conservatory established a saxophone class in 1858 with Sax as its first professor, and the saxophone seemed to be well on its way to being considered a legitimate orchestral instrument. Unfortunately, Sax left the conservatory in 1871, his position was not filled, and the saxophone's progress towards universal acceptance stalled.

The saxophone craze of the 1920s renewed interest in the instrument, and produced a succession of noted soloists, first in a popular and novelty vein playing songs like *Saxophobia* and *Sax-o-Phun*, but in the early 1930s, a group of legitimate classical saxophonists emerged, and some of the best composers of the period began writing music for them. Glazounov and Ibert wrote fine concerti for German-American virtuoso Sigurd Rascher. Marcel Mule emerged as leader of a French school of saxophone performance, and, after a seventy-one year vacancy, succeeded Sax as Professor of Saxophone at the Conservatory. American saxophonist Cecil Leeson inspired the composition of more than fifty new works for the instrument, including the Creston *Concerto*, composed in 1941.

Today's music is cast as a traditional three-movement concerto. The first movement, *Energetic*, opens in dramatic fashion, with strong musical statements by the orchestra and cadenza

opportunities for the soloist. The movement then settles into a pattern of driving, rhythmic music interspersed with lyrical passages. The second movement, *Meditative*, is written in 5/4 time (beats in groups of five, rather than the usual multiples of two or three), helping to give the expressive music a floating, dreamlike quality. The last movement, *Rhythmic*, displays the bravura nature of the instrument with dazzling displays of technique, leading to a powerful conclusion.