



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Ankush Kumar Bahl, Music Director

program notes

2024/25 SEASON

Tao Plays Rhapsody in Blue

September 20-21, 2024 | 7:30 p.m.

Holland Performing Arts Center

Ankush Kumar Bahl, conductor | Conrad Tao, piano

JOHN STAFFORD SMITH

The Star-Spangled Banner

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

I. Prologue

II. "Somewhere"

III. Scherzo

IV. Mambo

V. Cha-cha

VI. Meeting Scene

VII. "Cool" Fugue

VIII. Rumble

IX. Finale

WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Afro-American Symphony (Symphony No. 1)

I. Longing: Moderato assai

II. Sorrow: Adagio

III. Humor: Animato

IV. Aspiration: lento; con risoluzione

INTERMISSION

CONRAD TAO

Flung Out Concerto for Piano

Conrad Tao, piano

GEORGE GERSHWIN

Rhapsody in Blue

Conrad Tao, piano



Ankush Kumar Bahl, conductor

Currently in his fourth season as Music Director of the Omaha Symphony, Ankush Kumar Bahl has delivered resonant performances of masterworks (new and old) and continues to champion American composers and artists while pursuing innovative, community-based concert design. Committed to expanding the American repertoire, the Omaha Symphony and Maestro Bahl have commissioned seven new works in their first four seasons together and in 2023, their live recording of Andy Akiho's *Sculptures* garnered the Omaha

Symphony its first GRAMMY nominations in the orchestra's history. On the podium, Bahl is recognized by orchestras and audiences alike for his impressive conducting technique, thoughtful interpretations, innovative concert experiences, and engaging presence. In concert, he has left the *Washington Post* "wanting to hear more" and has been praised by the *New York Times* for his "clear authority and enthusiasm" and "ability to inspire."

Highlights of Bahl's classical series guest engagements include performances with the New York Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony, Houston Symphony, San Diego Symphony, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Orchestre National de France, Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de México, and the National Symphony Orchestra (D.C.). An experienced collaborator, Bahl has worked with many prominent soloists, among them Daniil Trifonov, Lang Lang, Emanuel Ax, Sarah Chang, Bhezod Abduraimov, Conrad Tao, Anthony McGill, and Kelley O'Connor.



Conrad Tao, piano

Pianist and composer Conrad Tao has been dubbed "the kind of musician who is shaping the future of classical music" by *New York Magazine*, and an artist of "probing intellect and open-hearted vision" by *The New York Times*.

Conrad's 2024/25 season includes a return to Carnegie Hall in recital performing Debussy's 12 Études, alongside *Keyed In*, a work arranged and improvised by Tao on the Lumatone. He also returns to the San Francisco

Symphony to perform Tchaikovsky with Nicholas Collon, the Dallas Symphony to perform Mozart with Jaap van Zweden, the St. Louis Symphony to perform Saint-Saëns with David Danzmayr, and the Baltimore Symphony to perform Mozart with Jonathon Heyward. Further appearances include the Indianapolis Symphony's opening Gala, as well as performances with the Seoul Philharmonic, and NDR Hannover with Ingo Metzmacher. He also continues his collaboration with award-winning dancer Caleb Teicher in a nationwide US tour.

In the 2023/24 season, Conrad made his subscription debut with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and re-united with the New York Philharmonic following summer appearances and his specially curated program for their Artist Spotlight series. Meanwhile, he celebrated Rachmaninov's 150th anniversary with recitals presented by the Cleveland Orchestra and Klavierfestival Ruhr. The season also saw performances with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Marin Alsop, and the Boston Symphony and Dima Slobodeniouk, as well as performances celebrating the 100th anniversary of *Rhapsody in Blue* at the Philharmonie Berlin, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, and the Concertgebouw Amsterdam with Matthias Pintscher and the Kansas City Symphony. His companion piece to Gershwin's *Rhapsody*, *Flung Out*, was commissioned by the Santa Rosa Symphony, Aspen Music Festival, and Omaha Symphony.

Symphonic Dances from West Side Story

Leonard Bernstein

Born: August 25, 1918 – Lawrence, MA

Died: October 14, 1990 – New York City, NY

Piece Length: Approximately 20 minutes.

The idea for a musical based on *Romeo and Juliet* was first suggested by Jerome Robbins to Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents in 1949. This music was to be called *East Side Story*, setting Jews and Catholics as the Capulets and Montagues. Laurents was doubtful and was moving to Hollywood, anyway, so the idea was shelved. Six years later, work began again on the music, now called *West Side Story*, to reflect the gang wars that were common on the west side of Manhattan at the time. A young, unknown lyricist named Stephen Sondheim completed the talented team.

West Side Story was an instant hit. It ran for 732 performances and was nominated for six Tony Awards including Best Musical, ultimately losing to another classic of the genre: *The Music Man*. In 1960, Bernstein created an orchestral suite from the musical, the *Symphonic Dances* featured today. The suite consists of nine movements and captures the story of the musical – everything from the simmering tension of “Cool,” the frenzied joy of “Mambo,” and the heart-breaking “Somewhere.”

Afro-American Symphony (Symphony No. 1)

William Grant Still

Born: May 11, 1895 – Woodville, MS

Died: December 3, 1978 – Los Angeles, CA

Piece Length: Approximately 25 minutes.

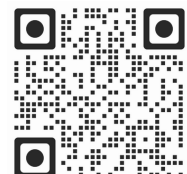
William Grant Still composed nearly 200 works in his lifetime, including five symphonies, four ballets, and numerous vocal and chamber works. He attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and studied with George Whitefield Chadwick and later with the great French modernist Edgard Varèse. He was a part of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s; his stature as a composer was so great that he has been referred to as the “Dean of Afro-American Composers.” His first major orchestral composition, *Symphony No. 1, Afro-American*, was composed in 1930 and premiered the following year by the Rochester Philharmonic conducted by Howard Hanson. The work took off, was performed all over the world, was among the most performed works by an American composer at that time, and remains one of his most popular works today.

Afro-American draws inspiration from two main sources: the blues, and the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. While Still chose not to put explicit descriptions within the symphony’s score, he marked them in personal notebooks. The resulting music is, at turns, gentle, loving, inspiring, joyful and majestic. It is also deeply rooted in a feeling of Americana – and will feel familiar, even if this is your first experience hearing the symphony.

This printed program is a condensed version.

For more info about the orchestra, guest artists, and the full program notes, download the Omaha Symphony app or scan this QR code with your mobile device.

*program subject to change



Program Notes

***Flung Out* Concerto for Piano**

Conrad Tao

Born: June 11, 1994 – Urbana, Illinois

Flung Out, Tao's new work co-commissioned by the Omaha Symphony, embodies the sense of treating the world—and one's path through it—as a prompt for music. On the most prosaic level, the piece is about the centennial of the premiere of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Like the *Rhapsody*, *Flung Out* exists in multiple arrangements: for its premiere, it mirrored the peculiar instrumentation of Paul Whiteman's band, complete with banjo, eight violins, one double bass (and no other strings), and piles of saxophones and brass, among other instruments. Here, it's expanded outward to match the opulent grandeur of Ferde Grofé's 1942 full orchestration.

Noting that the *Rhapsody* was a reinterpretation of the dance music of its time, Tao reflected on his own experiences with his contemporary dance music, specifically club music. He focused on how the dance floor places the dancer in a constantly evolving dialectic between the communal and the solitary, how they can be locked into a tight pulse with everyone else at one moment, only for some detail to launch them onto a more individual path, the difference between being on the inside and the outside of the beat or the sensation of being temporally flung out. While *Flung Out* doesn't overtly evoke the sounds of the club, its spirit animates the way the piece moves.

Tao further thinks about *Flung Out* (much like the *Rhapsody*, as fabulously rendered in *Fantasia 2000*) as capturing the sounds of living in New York City. In its opening moments, he transcribes a few particular sonic snapshots of his New York existence, and he really wants to get at the romance of the place throughout. To see the musical potential of his surroundings, his friends, his life, and make something new out of it.

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Rhapsody in Blue

George Gershwin

Born: September 26, 1898 – New York City, NY

Died: July 11, 1937 – Los Angeles, CA

Piece Length: Approximately 16 minutes.

In 1923, jazz bandleader Paul Whiteman was planning a concert titled “An Experiment in Modern Music” and approached George Gershwin to compose a concerto-like piece in honor of Abraham Lincoln. Gershwin declined due to time restraints. On January 4, 1924, a *New York Tribune* article called “What Is American Music?” was published about the concert that Whiteman was planning, and falsely claimed that Gershwin had begun “work on a jazz concerto.” This news, of course, surprised Gershwin, who called Whiteman the following day. Whiteman explained that an arch rival was planning on stealing his concert idea and he had to move quickly to present the concert first. By the end of the conversation, Whiteman had convinced Gershwin to compose the “jazz concerto” after all.

Gershwin set to work right away. On February 12, 1924, “An Experiment in Modern Music” was presented by the Palais Royal Orchestra led by Paul Whiteman. While the concert itself seems to have been long and underwhelming, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* – with the composer at the piano – was a tremendous success to the audience. The work is filled with a series of incredible and memorable melodies that range from the seductive opening clarinet glissando – one of the most recognizable openings in the history of Western Classical Music – to the final section that has been used in commercials for United Airlines for years, with many more wonderful melodies in between. It is a showcase of Gershwin's genius – all thanks to one very desperate play by Paul Whiteman.

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