

11-28-1990

## UR Moves Downtown

Department of Music, University of Richmond

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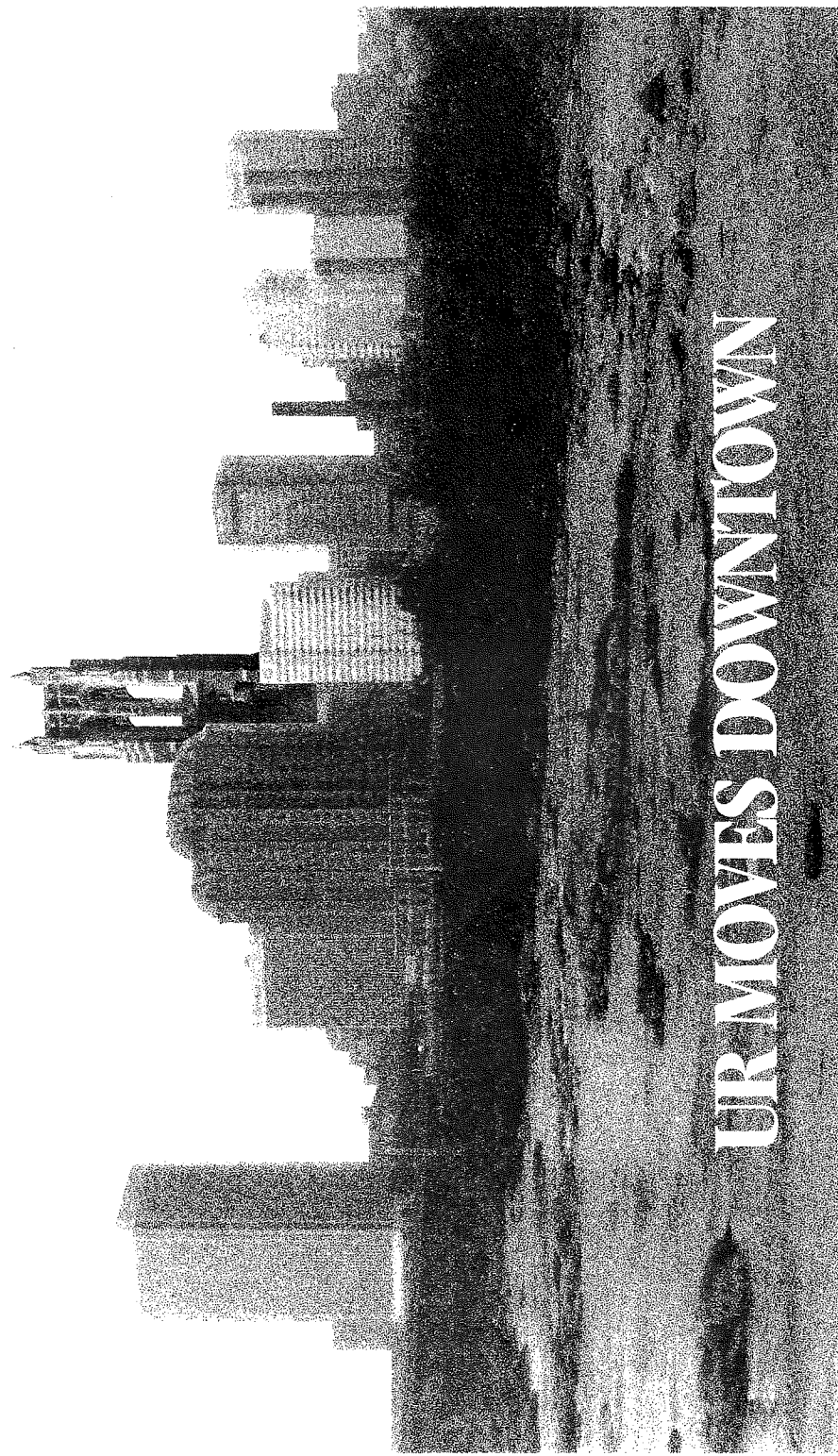
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# UR MOVES DOWNTOWN

11-28-90

# University of Richmond Concert Series at The Carpenter Center for the Performing Arts



**SEPTEMBER 30**  
**The Shanghai Quartet**  
with Richard Young, viola

**FEBRUARY 17**  
**Herbie Mann, flute**  
with the UR Jazz Band and Faculty Combo  
Michael Davison, director

**NOVEMBER 28**  
**The American Music/Theatre Group**  
Neely Bruce, director

**APRIL 30**  
**CURRENTS Concert**  
Fred Cohen, director



**All concerts are free and open to the public.**  
The concerts September 30 and February 17 begin at 3 p.m.  
The concerts November 28 and April 30 begin at 8 p.m.  
No tickets are required, but seating is  
on a first-come, first-seated basis.

*These concerts are made possible by a grant from The E.R. and L.B. Carpenter Foundation*

The American Music/Theatre Group  
Neely Bruce, *musical director and pianist*

John Basinger, *stage director*  
Sandra Kopell, *choreographer*

*The singers:*

Phyllis Bruce, Penney Kimbell, Mary Ann Liniak-Bodwell, Laura Cook,  
Martha Hanen, Charles Lindsey, Mark Hale, Paul Anderson,  
Gregory Servant, William Myers

This concert is made possible by a grant from the E. R. and L. B. Carpenter Foundation

**O P E R A O F A M E R I C A**  
excerpts from five operas composed in the United States

***Americana, or, A New Tale of the Genii***

music by Neely Bruce; libretto by Tony Connor, based on an anonymous 18th-century masque

Act II

The Entrance of Americana

the cast, in order of appearance:

Americana (Ms. Liniac-Bodell), Elutheria (Ms. Kimbell), Vesperia (Ms. Bruce)

Jellemo, Arianthus and Eutherius (Messrs. Lindsey, Myers and Anderson)

***Four Saints in Three Acts***

music by Virgil Thomson; libretto by Gertrude Stein

Act I

sung by the Commere (Ms. Hanen), the Compere (Mr. Servant), St. Teresa I (Ms. Liniak-Bodwell) St. Teresa II (Ms. Cook),  
St. Settlement (Ms. Bruce), St. Stephen (Mr. Hale), St. Ignatius (Mr. Myers), and many other saints

***Candide***

music by Leonard Bernstein; libretto by Lillian Hellman and Richard Wilbur

Act I

“The best of all possible worlds”

sung by Pangloss, Candide and Cunegonde (Messrs. Anderson and Servant, Ms. Kimbell)

“Glitter and be gay”

sung by Cunegonde

Act II

Finale: “Make our garden grow”

sung by Candide, Cunegonde and the company

# INTERMISSION

## *Troubled Island*

music by William Grant Still; libretto by Langston Hughes

### Act I

#### The Conspiracy

Dessalenes (Mr. Servant), Azelia (Ms. Cook), Martel (Mr. Anderson), and other slaves

Martel's aria, "Rememb'ring Africa"

### Act II

#### In the palace

the Emperor Dessalenes, Martel, The Empress Claire (Ms. Bruce), and Vuval (Mr. Lindsey)

Arioso of Martel, "I dream a world where man no other man will scorn"

Claire's song, "'Tis sunset in the garden"

Claire and Vuval, duet, "Love beckons! love calls!"

### Act IV

#### The Death of Dessalines

Dessalines, Popo (Mr. Hale), Stenio (Mr. Myers), and rebellious soldiers

Finale: Azelia's aria, "Jean Jacques, my lover"

## *Treemonisha*

music and libretto by Scott Joplin

### Act III

#### Prelude (piano solo)

duet of Ned (Mr. Myers) and Monisha (Ms. Hanen), "I want to see my child"

sermon by Remus (Mr. Hale), "Wrong is never right"

"A real slow drag"

sung and danced by Treemonisha (Ms. Kimbell), Lucy (Ms. Cook) and the company

**Neely Bruce** is a composer and former chair of the Music Department at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. Born in Memphis in 1944, and educated at the universities of Alabama and Illinois, he has worked indefatigably to promote American music of all periods and styles. In 1982 he conducted a similar retrospective of scenes from American operas for the Holland Festival in Amsterdam. Bruce is also the composer of over 500 pieces of music, including three operas, various orchestral works, keyboard music, electronic music, and over 200 solo songs; his three compositions for Electric Phoenix will be released on compact disc by Mode Recordings early in 1991.

The *American MusicTheatre Group* was incorporated in Connecticut in 1978. Its purpose is to present the complete range of American music, past and present, to the widest possible audience. AM/TG is the culmination of founding-director Neely Bruce's twenty-year commitment to the performance of American music. In addition to "Opera in America," historical concerts by Am/TG have included "Psalms Learned and Lined" (seventeenth-century religious music) and "Hartford, Northampton & Saybrook" (the music of the Connecticut River Valley before 1825). In 1988 AM/TG presented a gala performance of the John Cage *Song Books*, simultaneously performed with four other Cage indeterminate works, for Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors. The group has performed for New Music America in Chicago, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and other major museums throughout the Northeast, and at colleges and other locations throughout New England. David Borden's "Angels," the first in a series of new works for twelve voices and live electronics commissioned by the group, was recently performed by AM/TG and Mother Mallard for an international audience in Montreal as part of Montreal Musiques Actuelles/New Music America 1990.

AM/TG appears by arrangement with Jonathan Wentworth Associates, Ltd.

## PROGRAM NOTES

In tonight's entertainment the various operas are not presented in chronological order. Rather, they have been juxtaposed because of contrast and other considerations which relate to their entertainment value. During the course of the evening various members of the cast will explain enough of the dramatic situation to clarify the meaning and context of the individual numbers on the program. The reader of these notes, therefore, does not need to be overly concerned with opera plots and character development.

Rather than write about such matters, in the following paragraphs I have attempted to give an overview of the development of American opera, and the place in that development of the five works represented on tonight's program. I hope that this brief essay will introduce our audience to an important and little-known aspect of our cultural history (scholars of American music will forgive me for oversimplifying an extraordinarily complicated story).

Works for the musical stage have been enormously popular in the United States, beginning in colonial times. Most major cities on the east coast had active theatres which produced ballad operas throughout the eighteenth century. The eighteenth-century equivalent of musical comedies, these ballad operas were originally imported from England; indigenous ones were produced in increasing numbers in the early years of the republic. In the 1820s, with the arrival from Italy of Manuel Garcia's touring opera companies, Italian opera became all the rage with the American public. People responded with the greatest enthusiasm to the sweeping lyricism and emotional power of Bellini, Rossini and Donizetti, and a new Italianate era in American popular music was born. Just as the vogue for English stage music was followed by one for Italian music, later in the nineteenth century the American public would turn to German opera.



For most of the twentieth century opera has been an entertainment for the educated and the rich. It surprises most people today to realize the extent to which opera was a popular art in the nineteenth century. Operas with Italian, French or German libretti were almost always done in English translations. Tunes from operas were frequently turned into popular songs and dances, and entire scenes freely adapted to appeal to American taste. Frequently the atmosphere in the opera house resembled the circus or the vaudeville stage more than the sanctimonious opera houses of today.

Opera in America was in fact a distinctive genre, or at least a distinctive mode of presentation, long before there were American composers who attempted it. Waves of imported masterpieces entertained and educated audiences, but did little to foster an American school of opera. It was only a matter of time, however, before an adventurous composer in the United States would try to establish one.

William Henry Fry, international music critic for the *New York Herald* and passionate advocate of the American composer, was the first to compose an American grand opera in the European manner. Completed in 1842, his *Leonora*, with a libretto in Italian as well as one in English, was followed by *Notre Dame de Paris*. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century many composers were to produce one or two fine operas (George Bristow's *Rip Van Winkle* is the outstanding example) and Silas G. Pratt made a career as the composer of eight large works for the musical stage, all of the greatest seriousness.

A profound aesthetic issue before these composers, up to and including the so-called "second New England school" of the turn of the century (George Chadwick, Horatio Parker, Amy Beach, to name three of them who wrote fine operas), was the extent to which their opera would be American. Fry had taken a strong stand on this point. Opera was a clearly defined genre, and the Italians and French knew how to do it. An American could do it too. With the notable exceptions of Bristow and Chadwick, who took American subject matter for their libretti and consciously incorporated some elements of vernacular music making into their scores, Americans who wrote operas in the late nineteenth century set out to show that "we can do it too."

This approach certainly produced far more good music than is generally appreciated. Many of these works, were they revived in excellent productions, would be of considerable interest to the public and musical scholars alike. However, it is clear that the development of a distinctively American operatic style, and the production of uniquely American works, is only foreshadowed in this period. The real American opera composer, with an unmistakable American voice, arrived in the twentieth century.

\*\*\*The meteoric career of Scott Joplin (1868-1917) was launched in the late 1890s with his biggest hit, the ever-popular *Maple Leaf Rag*. Joplin clearly saw that ragtime was not just another flash in the popular pan, but a style with extraordinary emotional flexibility and the potential for large-scale composition. He first produced a ballet, *The Rag Time Dance*, then an opera called *The Guest of Honor*, which is unfortunately lost. In 1911 he published his masterpiece *Treemonisha*. A brilliantly original work, its subject matter is unique in the in the history of opera. It is about a small community of blacks in rural Arkansas, and their progression from ignorance and superstition to knowledge. It portrays the ageless conflict between good and evil as the conflict between those who maintain power by exploiting the naivete of others and those who would educate others to free them. The central character is a woman who is completely atypical as an opera heroine; she is strong, smart, and never sexually manipulative.

On top of this optimistic tale, refreshingly free of both the tragic cliches and comic stereotypes of European opera, Joplin places some of his most delightful and memorable music. The various numbers of *Treemonisha* are sometimes whimsically chromatic (almost like syncopated Wagner), sometimes lyrical and wistful, and sometimes straight-ahead ragtime. The composer demonstrates without a doubt that you can write major works in a popular style, the music can be absolutely first-rate, and the result will be unmistakably American.

Joplin died a neglected figure, still relatively young, and his operatic masterpiece was not given a full production until long after his death.

\*\*\*Perhaps because of the color of his skin, Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) was to have a very different sort of reception for his equally original, equally American masterpiece. As a young man Thomson met Gertrude Stein in Paris. He was fascinated by her poetry and had begun to set some of it to music. He proposed that she write a libretto for him. After considering several possibilities (one of them was an opera about George Washington) Stein decided to write about Spanish saints, in particular St. Teresa of Avila and St. Ignatius Loyola. The resulting piece of literature is one of the most hermetic of the Stein texts, certain to frustrate anyone overly concerned with its meaning. On the level of sound painting and variety of language, however, it is one of her finest pieces, and it was ideal for Thomson's purposes. The result is a musical collage of repetitive tonal fragments which clearly prefigure minimalism, interlarded with banal tunes, scale passages, and lyrical moments of extraordinary beauty.

Completed in 1929, the first performances of *Four Saints in Three Acts* took place in 1936 in the Avery Theatre of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. New York socialites and prominent intellectuals traveled by limousine to see the cellophane sets of Florine Stettheimer and hear the wonderful singing by the all-black cast. A never-to-be-forgotten occasion, the premiere of *Four Saints* would make Thomson a famous man and increase Stein's already blossoming reputation. One phrase of the libretto, "Pigeons on the grass alas," entered the mainstream of the language almost immediately; as Stein would later say, "My little sentences have gotten under their skins."

AM/TG's performances of Act One makes no attempt to duplicate the splendor of that glamorous occasion. Rather, it recasts *Four Saints* as a series of theatre games, lean, mean, and on the scene. The Commere and Compere are the referees, while the Saints combine and recombine in everchanging formations, always on the move and out to score.

Black musicals had been produced for minority audiences and occasionally on tour in the United States since the 1890's. The legendary black cast of *Four Saints* made the more mainstream opera-going public aware of the potential of black singers working in this medium. Thomson claimed that he had directly inspired Gershwin to write *Porgy and Bess*; in any case *Four Saints* was the first opera with an all-black cast to appear on the American stage.

\*\*\*The first black composer after Joplin to venture into the operatic medium was William Grant Still (1895-1978), whose remarkable *Troubled Island* was produced by New York City Opera in 1949. *Troubled Island* has a no-holds-barred libretto by Langston Hughes about the slave revolt in Haiti which ousted the French and installed a black emperor. The subject matter is quintessentially political, and Hughes does not hesitate to present this story in a way which does not flatter the successful revolutionaries. The vanquished French colonials are never seen on stage and indeed are hardly mentioned. Instead we see the infighting and ultimate treachery of those around Jean Jacques Dessalines, and the bitter aftertaste of a revolution which ultimately fails because of greed, selfishness, and stupidity.

In dramatic conception this is certainly one of the most powerful American operas. It is the work of the finest black poet and the finest black composer of the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Still said that he attempted in this opera to write a genuine American music which would be perceived as such, placing him directly in the line of opera composers under discussion. It was produced by a major opera company and conducted by Leopold Stokowski, perhaps the most important conductor in the country at the time. *Troubled Island* would seem to have had everything going for it. Why then has the work not been done since its first production? The answer to this question is far from clear; it may be a case of artistic racism, pure and simple. There would seem to be other factors at work as well. The explosive nature of the subject matter would have appealed to few among the musical establishment in the 1950s. By the 1960s, when such a piece would have been welcome, Still was an old man, Hughes was dead, the artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance were largely forgotten, and the cultural agenda of the United States had almost nothing to do with operas of any description. There is the real possibility of a major production of the piece in the 1990s; perhaps when that occurs *Troubled Island* will finally have its due, as *Treemonisha* did when it was produced in the 1970s.

\*\*\*While the 1950s were not receptive to new operas of a controversial nature, the decade was a very good time for American musicals, especially large-scale ones which made more and more demands on the singers and indeed are borderline operas. There are a few pieces of this type which seem more like operas than musicals, and *Candide* by Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) is perhaps the most operatic of them all. Of all the Bernstein musicals this one has

had the most qualified success, and this may be due to the fact that the piece has a foot in two camps. "Glitter and be gay" is certainly a full-blown operatic *scena*, and has nothing about it which smacks of musical comedy, except that it is very funny. But "Make our garden grow," one of Lenny's greatest hits, is almost colloquial in its directness, and seems almost out of place as an operatic finale. The wonderfully satirical proof by Pangloss that we live in the "Best of all possible worlds" is by turns a hit tune and an operatic ensemble.

The composer called this piece an operetta, another inaccurate appellation which dodges the issue. I prefer to think of *Candide* as an opera, albeit one which masquerades as a musical; This is why we are doing part of it tonight. Just as Joplin expanded opera to include ragtime and Thomson expanded opera to include Southern Baptist hymnody, Bernstein expanded opera to include musical comedy but did not bother to point out the fact. The proper place of this wonderful piece of music is on the operatic stage, and perhaps when it is done routinely by opera companies it will have the success it deserves.

\*\*\*The most recent piece represented in Opera of America is a brief ensemble from my own opera *Americana, or, A New Tale of the Genii*, an allegorical opera of the American Revolution. In tonight's production the entrance of Americana, the mythological guardian of genius of our country, and her meeting with Elutheria, the genius of liberty who has fled the Old World for the New, seems an appropriate introduction to an attempted overview of the American opera of this century. The nymph Vesperia, one of Americana's cohorts, is the first to sing the words which so optimistically envision the development of all of the arts in the United States:

*To our Allegania Olumpus must yield ,  
Here freedom and virtue with glory's revealed.*

It is of more than passing interest that so many American operas have libretti by important literary figures. Tonight we hear in succession the words of three of America's finest poets: Gertrude Stein, Richard Wilbur, and Langston Hughes. These are framed by decidedly different texts; first the meanderings of an anonymous eighteenth-century poet (filtered, as it were, through the literary sensibilities of Tony Connor), and finally Joplin's own text for *Treemonisha*, brilliant but somewhat rough and ready. Taken as a whole, the words for these American operas are full of vitality and imagination; they certainly are never routine, and unlike so many European libretti, they are never hack-work.

Is there then a school of American opera, and is it different in any substantial way from the work of Europeans? I would answer a resounding "yes" to both of these questions. Besides the works on tonight's program, there are other works by Thomson, Still, Bernstein and myself which fit the category, as well as the aforementioned *Rip Van Winkle* of Bristow; the operas of Harry Partch, Marc Blitzstein and Tom Johnson; *Einstein on the Beach*; and of course *Porgy and Bess*. There are many works by more obscure composers, and there is a whole new generation writing American operas at an unprecedented rate.

As the twentieth century comes to a close, and we look forward to a new millennium as well as a new century, there are many possibilities for American opera. The most important issue, however, is how to get more of these works on the stage; they are some of the most original and provocative products of American culture, and need to be seen and heard on a regular basis. An evening such as this one can only show bits and pieces of a few works; major companies can show us entire operas in all their splendor.

— Neely Bruce  
November, 1990

The University of Richmond Concert Series  
for  
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will feature concerts by Faculty, Students, Performing Ensembles, Guest Artists

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## THE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

The Department of Music at the University of Richmond offers both the Bachelor of Arts degree for those who want to major in music as part of a liberal arts curriculum and a Bachelor of Music degree for those wanting a more specialized major. Full-time faculty members are:

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**Michael Davison**, assistant professor. BME Eastman School of Music; MST University of Wisconsin (Whitewater); DMA University of Wisconsin (Madison). Director, University Jazz Ensemble. Applied trumpet.

**Catharine Pendleton Kirby**, assistant professor. BM Women's College of the University of North Carolina; voice study with Jean Sanders, Earl Berg, Raymond McDermitt, Cornelius Reid, Frederick Wilkerson; coaching with Wyatt Insko, Martin Katz, Pierre Bernac, Suzanne Chereau. Applied voice.

**Jonathan Bellman**, visiting assistant professor. BA University of California at Santa Barbara; MM University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; DMA Stanford University. Applied piano program.

*Faculty for additional applied music lessons are employed from the Richmond Symphony Orchestra and the city.*

**The Shanghai Quartet** is Quartet-in-Residence at the University of Richmond.

## THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

The University of Richmond has a strong commitment to the city of Richmond and surrounding localities through outreach activities and through numerous programs that are free and open to the public. Hundreds of free cultural and educational events are offered each year by UR organizations and departments. The music department, for example, sponsored over 30 free concerts on campus last year and brought four concerts downtown.

The University's students are deeply involved in the community as well. The student-run Volunteer Action Council helps provide service to community agencies, from adolescent and aging issues, to health, housing and hunger concerns. Another group, Golden Key, is involved in "say-no-to-drugs" campaigns in middle and elementary schools.

The T.C. Williams School of Law offers *pro bono* work, volunteer tax assistance and a Youth Advocacy Clinic; the Campus Ministries are involved in refugee resettlement, Freedom House and many other community activities; and the University's Women's Resource Center offers such free services as Brown Bag Lunches and a Legal Hotline.





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