

LIVE
FROM LINCOLN CENTER



December 31, 2009 at 8:00pm on PBS
New York Philharmonic New Year's Eve Concert with Thomas Hampson

A tradition almost as venerable as Live From Lincoln Center itself is our live coverage of the New York Philharmonic's annual New Year's Eve concert. The next installment in that tradition will take place on Thursday evening, December 31, when once again our cameras and microphones will be in place in Avery Fisher Hall to bring you the drama and excitement of the first Philharmonic New Year's Eve concert to be conducted by the orchestra's new Music Director, Alan Gilbert.

Maestro Gilbert is only the second American-born conductor to head the Philharmonic (the first was Leonard Bernstein), and quite appropriately he has chosen a program made up entirely of music by American composers. The Philharmonic will play two seminal works in the American orchestral repertory: the Suite from Aaron Copland's ballet "Appalachian Spring" and George Gershwin's "An American in Paris". They will be joined by the newly-appointed first Artist-in-Residence of the orchestra, the great American baritone, Thomas Hampson, who will sing a group of Copland's settings of Old American Songs along with a collection of some of the greatest songs by Cole Porter.

The very first time I ever spoke into a live radio microphone was in the Spring of 1944 at the studios of the Harvard Crimson Network (many years later renamed WHRB). On the other side of that microphone sat Aaron Copland who was delivering the prestigious Norton Lectures at Harvard at the time. We talked about his music and his career; by then he had become America's leading composer, with "El Salon Mexico" and the two "Western" ballets "Rodeo" and "Billy the Kid" already to his credit. At one point I asked him what he was working on currently. "Martha Graham has asked me to write the music for a ballet she has in mind," was his response. That score, of course, turned out to be "Appalachian Spring", perhaps Copland's most enduring--certainly his most popular---work.

Copland proceeded to extract a Suite from his score and to arrange it for full symphony orchestra (the original was for a small ensemble of thirteen players). Three of America's great orchestras opened their 1945-46 seasons on the same week-end: the New York Philharmonic under Artur Rodzinski; the Boston Symphony under Copland's great champion, Serge Koussevitzky; and the Cleveland Orchestra playing under its newly-designated Music Director, George Szell. ALL THREE chose the "Appalachian Spring" Suite for the opening programs of their season. Then came the question as to credit for the world premier of the score. That honor fell to Rodzinski and the Philharmonic by virtue of the fact that they played a Thursday evening performance, while the Boston and Cleveland performances did not occur until the next day!

Gershwin's "An American in Paris" needs little introduction. The title is self-referential, recalling the time in the late 1920s when Gershwin was indeed an American in Paris seeking advanced musical training there. The story goes that at one point he sought out the great French master, Maurice Ravel, with the hope of a few private lessons in orchestration. Gershwin was by then well-known, not only for his work on Broadway and Tin Pan Alley but also as the composer of the "Rhapsody in Blue" and the Piano Concerto in F. Ravel at one point asked Gershwin what his annual income was. When he heard Gershwin's reply, his response was "And YOU want to take lessons from ME?"

The balance of our New Year's Eve program showcases Thomas Hampson. Having established himself as the pre-eminent American baritone of our time on the world's great opera and concert stages, Thomas Hampson is devoting a major portion of his professional life to exploring and performing American song. Thus he has selected five songs from Copland's two cycles of Old American Songs for his collaboration with Alan Gilbert and the New York Philharmonic on the first half of the New Year' Eve gala. One of those songs, incidentally, is the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" which also serves Copland as the basis of a theme and variations in "Appalachian Spring". The group of Cole Porter songs chosen by Thomas Hampson includes some of the greatest classics in the American Songbook, among them "In the Still of the Night", "Anything Goes", "Night and Day", and "Begin the Beguine".

So we await a Festive New Year's Eve concert on Live From Lincoln Center Thursday evening, December 31. Since not all stations on the PBS Network carry the program live, I urge you to check the schedule of your local station for the exact day and time of the telecast in your area.

Enjoy! And a very Happy New Year to you all!!

MARTIN BOOKSPAN