

Francis Johnson (1792–1844)

Mrs. Camac’s Suite

Francis Johnson was a Black bandleader and composer based in Philadelphia. He was one of the earliest known African American composers and the first African American music publisher. His band was one of the pre-eminent American ensembles of the day, and the first to undertake an international tour. His band’s far-reaching reputation was established through performances in 17 of the 26 United States at the time, the Wisconsin Territory, the colony of Upper Canada, and the United Kingdom. By playing for White, Black, and integrated audiences (including leading integrated bands on some occasions), he performed for many of the leading figures of his day—including performances at the tomb-side celebration of George Washington’s Centenary and at two US presidential inaugurations.

The “March” and “Waltz” performed tonight come from a set of pieces dedicated to Elizabeth Baynton Markoe, shortly after her marriage to William Masters Camac. As wealthy socialites, the newlyweds sponsored a “bachelor’s ball” for the City Dancing Assembly, for which these pieces were composed. We can speculate that the “March” was performed for the newlyweds’ grand entrance, while the “Waltz” may have been their first dance of the evening.

Tonight’s performance is the first known performance of these dances since their premiere at the Camacs’ Bachelor’s Ball in January 1829.

Colin Roust, editor of Francis Johnson: Complete Works

Samuel Barber (1910 – 1981)

Adagio for Strings, Op. 11

Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings is one of the most profound and widely recognized works in the American orchestral repertoire. Originally composed in 1936 as the slow movement of his String Quartet, Op. 11, Barber later arranged the music for string orchestra at the request of conductor Arturo Toscanini, who premiered it in 1938. Since then, the Adagio has become synonymous with expressions of mourning, reflection, and collective remembrance.

The work unfolds as a single, continuous arch, built upon a long, stepwise melodic line that gradually rises in intensity. Barber’s use of sustained phrases and seamless voice leading creates a sense of suspended time, as the music seems to breathe and expand organically. The texture remains transparent throughout, allowing the expressive weight to rest on subtle harmonic shifts and the cumulative shaping of the melodic line.

At its emotional peak, the music reaches a powerful, almost overwhelming climax before dissolving into silence. This moment of release is followed by a quiet return, marked by a sense of resignation and fragile calm. The simplicity of Barber’s musical language—free of overt virtuosity or decorative excess—heightens the work’s emotional immediacy.

Often performed at moments of public grief and memorial, the Adagio for Strings has taken on a cultural significance beyond the concert hall. Its enduring impact lies in its ability to convey deep sorrow and introspection with clarity, dignity, and timeless beauty.

Aaron Copland (1900 – 1990)

Hoe Down from “Rodeo”

Aaron Copland’s Hoe-Down is the exuberant finale of his 1942 ballet Rodeo, a work that helped define his unmistakable “American” musical style. Commissioned by choreographer Agnes de Mille, the ballet portrays life in the American West, telling the story of a cowgirl searching for acceptance and love. Hoe-Down accompanies the ballet’s final celebration, where community, energy, and festivity take center stage.

The music is driven by lively rhythms and incorporates traditional American folk tunes, most notably “Bonaparte’s Retreat.” Copland transforms these melodies through inventive orchestration, syncopation, and shifting accents, creating a vibrant and propulsive soundscape. Sharp rhythmic figures, offbeat accents, and dynamic contrasts give the piece its unmistakable vitality and sense of forward motion.

Copland’s orchestration is both colorful and economical, highlighting the brilliance of the full ensemble while allowing individual sections—particularly strings and percussion—to shine with clarity and precision. The open harmonies and wide intervals characteristic of Copland’s style evoke a sense of spaciousness often associated with the American landscape, even within the fast-paced, dance-like context of this movement.

Hoe-Down has become one of Copland’s most popular works, frequently performed in both concert halls and popular culture. Its infectious energy, rhythmic drive, and unmistakable character capture a spirit of celebration and communal joy, bringing Rodeo to a thrilling and memorable conclusion.