



UNC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
TONU KALAM, MUSIC DIRECTOR AND CONDUCTOR

Wednesday, April 28, 2021 at 7:30 P.M.
Kenan Music Building Rehearsal Hall

PROGRAM

Zigeunerweisen, Op. 20

Pablo de Sarasate
(1844–1908)

Amy L. Zhang, violin
(winner of UNC Concerto Competition)

Dark Testament for String Orchestra

William Henry Curry
(b. 1954)

- I. “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ’Round”
(Tribute to Mahalia Jackson, “The Queen of Gospel”)
- II. “Love and Loss” (Tribute to Pauli Murray, whose famous book of poetry is titled *Dark Testament*)
- III. “The Underground Railroad” (Tribute to Harriet Tubman)

Jointly commissioned by the UNCISO and Arts Everywhere
(world premiere performance)

Serenade in C major, Op. 48
Pezzo in forma di Sonatina
Valse
Élégie
Finale (Tema Russo)

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840–1893)



Violin I

Ayman Bejjani, *concertmaster*
Andrew Withrow
Frances Norton
Sarah Davis
Saakshi Navile
Tony Feng
Brandon Koluch
Michelle Luo

Audrey Lin
Ameer Qaqish
Lilliana Soucaze
Michael Lee
Tessa Hong

Viola

Bennett Congdon, *principal*
Emily Williams
Tate Jones
Annagabriela Redding
Jennifer Williams
Lillian Sterba

Cello

Kevin Agner, *principal*
David Kim
Alex Salvaggio
Claire Chang
James Larkins
Claire Warr

Bass

Andrew Bryant, *principal*
Catherine Steele

Violin II

Maria Manning, *principal*
Alec Ohanian

PROGRAM NOTE

BY WILLIAM HENRY CURRY

My new work is the result of a commission from Professor Tonu Kalam and the UNC Symphony Orchestra, with matching funding provided by *Arts Everywhere*. I am grateful to have had this opportunity to write a work for this wonderful ensemble and its remarkable conductor, who has been a fervent champion of American contemporary music.

My new work is for string orchestra and is based on African American spirituals. Having played the violin, viola, and string bass in my youth, I feel comfortable writing for this combination of instruments. My desire to compose works based on African American spirituals began with the composition *Karamu*, a commission from the North Carolina Symphony that was premiered in 2009.

The importance of these spirituals cannot be overestimated. These songs are a melting pot of African music and Euro-American hymns and were the incubator for many kinds of music, including blues, jazz, gospel, R& B, rock 'n' roll, and hip-hop. In fact, one could say there is *no* authentic American-sounding music that has not in some way been influenced by spirituals.

For me, the most moving and meaningful description of the true message of these songs comes from Frederick Douglass. He was born a slave, escaped to freedom, and became an abolitionist. In his memoirs, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he writes:

“Enslaved people would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God from deliverance from chains. The hearing of these wild notes always depressed my spirit and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while listening to them.”

These songs that yearn for the bright life of freedom were born into the dark misery of bondage. And their power and poetry have moved me since childhood. It was both a moving and exhilarating experience to write this work. I hope I have been worthy of the task of setting these gems in a new symphonic context.

Dark Testament is in three connected sections.

Movement 1: “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ’Round”

The piece begins with a quodlibet of spirituals found in a book titled *Slave Songs of 1865*. Each member of the string quartet plays a different spiritual in a different tempo. This is suddenly interrupted by the defiant song “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ’Round”. The lyrics portray the attitude of someone who, despite the most dire of circumstances, will not allow themselves to be defeated. The rhythms here are redolent of those found in gospel songs. In this section, and throughout the remainder of the piece, the string quartet offers solos and is joined by a string bass. Next, we hear the ebullient spiritual “Wait, Mr. Mackright.” This buoyant melody transforms the militant mood into something less assertive and more joyous. The first song returns, and the music slowly fades away.

The sub-theme of *Dark Testament* is a tribute to three heroic African American women who, despite all odds, persevered and achieved memorable contributions to their country. This opening movement

is a tribute to Mahalia Jackson, who was famous at the height of her career as “The Queen of Gospel.” She was well-known for her version of “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ’Round.”

Movement 2: “Love and Loss”

The famous spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” frames the piece, which is an elegiac tribute to Pauli Murray. Murray was born in Baltimore and grew up in Durham, but never knew her parents. Her life as a renaissance woman was filled with turmoil and triumph. She was the first female African American priest, she was a lawyer, a poet, an author, and a civil rights and women’s equality activist. Her sexuality was fluid, and some historians now categorize her as being transgender. My piece takes its title from her collected book of poems, *Dark Testament*.

Movement 3: “The Underground Railroad”

This movement begins with two modern spirituals that I wrote a decade ago. The first is a hymn that is later turned into a jazz waltz. The second song, “The Underground Railroad,” is first stated by the solo violin and then we hear a series of transformations of that melody. The two spirituals from the first movement return, crowning the coda of the entire work with light and optimism.

This movement is a tribute to Harriet Tubman. She was one of the courageous conductors (guides) of the fabled “underground railroad.” This was neither a railroad nor was it underground. Rather, it was a series of routes and safe places that thousands of slaves used to escape to freedom from the South to the North or to Canada. Harriet Tubman risked her life dozens of times on these journeys. During the Civil War, she was a Union spy and after the war was an activist for women’s suffrage.

As mentioned, this was not a real railroad, but I was unable to resist including in this movement the sounds of steam engine trains! Trains have always been a metaphor in the Black community for the journey from despair to hope. This is the emotional and spiritual journey I have tried to describe in *Dark Testament*.

BIOGRAPHY

William Henry Curry was appointed Music Director and Conductor of the Durham Symphony Orchestra on May 7, 2009. For twenty years Maestro Curry was the Resident Conductor and Summerfest Artistic Director of the North Carolina Symphony in Raleigh. He came to the North Carolina Symphony by way of New Orleans, where he had served as Resident Conductor of the New Orleans Symphony.

A native of Pittsburgh, Curry started conducting and composing music at age 14. His first major appointment was at age 21, when he was named Assistant Conductor of the Richmond Chamber Orchestra. On the same day, he was called in to replace a conductor who suddenly became ill for a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Maestro Curry’s unexpected debut was hailed by the critics and audience alike. He went on to serve as Resident Conductor with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for six years (1978-1983) and with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra for two years (1983-1985).

Maestro Curry was appointed Associate Conductor of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra in 1983, a post he held until 1988, the same year he was named winner of the Leopold Stokowski Conducting Competition and performed in Carnegie Hall. He was featured conductor for the tour and recording

of Anthony Davis' Grammy-nominated opera *X*. He has also conducted opera productions with the New York City Opera, the Houston Grand Opera, and the Chicago Opera Theater.

William Henry Curry has conducted over 40 orchestras, including appearances with the Chicago, Cleveland, Houston, National, Detroit, Atlanta, Denver, American, and San Diego symphony orchestras and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. In November of 1997 he made his debut in Israel with the Israel Camerata Jerusalem, and he has also conducted orchestras in Bangkok and Taiwan. In the 2002-03 season he made appearances as guest conductor with the Indianapolis and New Jersey symphony orchestras. He made his conducting debut with the New York City Ballet in December 2002 in their famed Balanchine production of *The Nutcracker*. Guest conducting reengagements included a return to the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and the New York City Ballet, as well as debut performances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

As a composer, Maestro Curry has had his works played by many of America's finest orchestras. On June 13, 1999, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra premiered his *Eulogy for a Dream*. This work, based on the speeches and writings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a tremendous success and received a standing ovation. The piece was broadcast nationally in January 2000 on the National Public Radio program "Performance Today."

Maestro Curry is also committed to new music and has conducted premières by, among others, Joseph Schwantner, William Bolcom, Lukas Foss, and Adolphus Hailstork. The range of artists he has worked with in his career runs the gamut from Zubin Mehta and Aaron Copland to John Williams and Ella Fitzgerald. In addition, he has been a beacon for promising young musicians, both as an instructor at the Peabody Conservatory and the Baltimore School for the Arts, and as a mentor to many young conductors.