

## Temple University Symphony Orchestra

Luis Biava, conductor

Hirono Oka, violin

October 28, 2011 at 7:30pm – Temple Performing Arts Center

### About the Program

#### *About Wissahickon Scenes*

As I thought about the problem of composing an orchestral work that somehow touched on the experience of Native Americans in Pennsylvania, I kept circling back to the question of how a person of European heritage could responsibly touch the stories of the Lenape, also known as the “Delaware,” without distorting them. For a time, I thought that I could focus on depictions of Native Americans by settlers, colonial politicians, and missionaries, but abandoned that idea as too dependent on text for a piece without words.

As luck would have it, Karl Middleman, music director of the Classical Symphony, learned serendipitously of a collection of Lenape songs in the audio archives of the American Philosophical Society, and of the work of Dr. Timothy Powell, Senior Research Scientist at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. We visited Dr. Powell in the summer of 2009, and I spent a fascinating hour with audio archivist Brian Carpenter, who led me through a set of recordings from the APS archives.

Among the collection was a group of Dictaphone recordings made in Philadelphia in 1928 by Frank G. Speck, author of *A Study of the Delaware Indian Big House Ceremony* (1931). James C. Webber, *wi•t•a•p•anó•xwe*, sang a number of songs purported to be authentic Delaware melodies and lyrics. In 1969, Dr. Ives Goddard played tapes of the songs to three Delawares, aged 64, 79, and 81, living in Oklahoma, who identified some as Delaware and some as Shawnee. Through restoring these recordings, transcribing them, and composing a work that presented them in concert, I hoped to make some contribution to the preservation of Lenape music.

I selected 5 songs that Goddard had concluded were probably Delaware, and whose recordings were clear enough to transcribe. Three different songs were titled “Pleasure Dance,” one was called “Raccoon Dance,” and one bore the title “Atehomwin [vision-recital] song of Kanipaxoxwe.” The wax cylinder recording system contributed significant surface noise, comprising a constant grinding sound, plus a rhythmic pinging sound that could be mistaken for a drum. The cylinder would occasionally abruptly change speed, contributing a surprising modulation to the melody. The Dictaphone, intended to record the speaking voice for transcription, captured few low frequency sounds, leading to a very harsh, shrill sound that favored the drum over the voice.

Using computer sound processing techniques, I produced recordings that were suitable for transcription, and rendered all 5 songs into conventional notation. The songs form the basis for the first movement, “Lenape Dances,” and the “Atehomwin Song” recurs in the final movement, “The (Invisible) People,” where a short snippet of the recording is heard within the orchestral texture.

Coincidentally, while I was composing this work, I was involved in presenting a new work as part of the American Philosophical Society’s “Dialogues With Darwin” exhibition. During those rehearsals and concerts, I heard wonderful playing by great Philadelphia musicians, and was impressed with the strength and brilliance of Hirono Oka’s playing. Hirono was the featured musician for the Classical Symphony’s May program, and it became clear to me that the work should be about the interplay between one voice and many voices. Unbeknownst to Karl and Hirono at the time, the work turned into a concerto for violin, string orchestra and harp, in which the soloist leads us through the landscape and embellishes the scene.

The three movements generally depict three periods in the history of the Lenape. “Lenape Dances” is set in the 18th century, when the Lenape culture flourished even as treaties with the Europeans were arranged, but before the hideous “Walking Purchase” in which the heirs of William Penn swindled the Lenape of land holdings in much of Eastern Pennsylvania. The second Movement, “Trail Of Tears,” is a series of dirge canons commemorating the exodus of the Lenape. The movement is interrupted by two statements of a canon that to me connotes the Christian missionaries who played a complicit role in what can only be described as genocide. The final movement, “The (Invisible) People,” suggests the situation of the present day, where the remnants of the Lenape culture are obscured by the colonial culture that usurped it, similar to the way the surface noise of the Dictaphone recordings obscured the music within.

~ Maurice Wright