

**25 | WHERE MUSIC
26 | COMES ALIVE!**



Photo Credit: James Farley

LARA ST. JOHN: THE ANCIENT FLAME

JANUARY 17, 2026 | 7:30 pm | Metropolitan United

Co-Presenting Partners: *Serenata Music* and **Beverley Zaifman**

Presented with the support of the
Azrieli Music Prizes Performance Fund



Guest Artists

- Lara St. John, *violin*
- Nicolas Ellis, *conductor*

London
Symphonia



**JOSH MORGAN
MAYOR**

Dear Friends,

On behalf of London City Council, it is my pleasure to extend a warm welcome to London Symphonia's 2025–2026 Season. We are honored to have such a distinguished ensemble in our community, and we eagerly anticipate the musical experiences you will bring to our residents.

London Symphonia has long been a shining star in our city's artistic constellation, and your unwavering dedication to musical excellence continues to enrich the lives of residents across all ages. Each performance you deliver resonates deeply, creating treasured memories and nurturing a lasting love for the arts in our community.

As you enter your ninth season, we celebrate not only the enduring legacy of the Symphonia but also the exciting diversity of this year's program. From timeless classics to innovative contemporary works, the season promises something to captivate every listener. We are especially proud that many concerts will feature guest artists from London and the surrounding region - highlighting the incredible talent that thrives right here at home.

The beautiful Metropolitan United Church offers an inspiring setting where the power of live orchestral music can truly come alive, bringing people together to share in moments of joy, reflection, and unity. As we gather to enjoy this season's offerings, let us remember the unique ability of music to inspire, heal, and connect us all. Whether you are a longtime supporter or experiencing London Symphonia for the first time, I invite you to immerse yourself fully in the magic of this remarkable ensemble.

Thank you for your commitment to enriching our community through the power of music. Here's to a season filled with unforgettable performances and shared inspiration.

Kind regards,

Josh Morgan
Mayor, City of London

City of London
Office of Mayor Josh Morgan
300 Dufferin Avenue
P.O. Box 5035
London, ON N6A 4L9

WELCOME to LARA ST. JOHN: THE ANCIENT FLAME!

Happy New Year! We are thrilled to welcome the internationally acclaimed violinist **Lara St. John** home to London and **Nicolas Ellis**, one of Canada's most sought-after conductors, as they each make their London Symphonia debut in this landmark concert.

We are kickstarting 2026 with three exceptional concerts, each of which will take you on a unique musical journey: from the brilliant music and breathtaking artistry of [Lara St. John: The Ancient Flame](#), to a [special celebration of Valentine's Day on February 14](#) with London's own **Denise Pelley**, to our Family Concert, [An Enchanting Afternoon: Peter and the Wolf](#), a delightful introduction to the instruments of the orchestra for children and people of all ages, **on Sunday, March 8**. We hope you will join us in the upcoming weeks.

If you haven't already, please explore our new **Watch and Listen** video on demand channel. You can subscribe or rent every concert in the 2025-26 Season plus access a treasure trove of outstanding concerts from the past three seasons along with companion materials. Click [HERE](#) to find out more.

To all our patrons and donors **thank you for your friendship, encouragement and support**. Your continued belief in our creativity and commitment to bringing the joy and transformative power of music to people of all ages across the community is vital to London Symphonia's success, not just in bringing performances like the one tonight to life but through our comprehensive education and outreach programs. On behalf of the musicians, staff, and Board of Directors, our heartfelt thanks for your support.

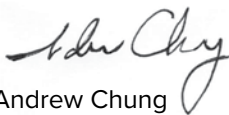
We hope you will enjoy tonight's concert and spread the word to family and friends.

Looking forward to seeing you often in 2026!

Sincerely,



April Voth
Executive Director



Andrew Chung
Artistic Producer

London
Symphonia 

LARA ST. JOHN: THE ANCIENT FLAME

JANUARY 17, 2026 | 7:30 pm | Metropolitan United

Felix Mendelssohn

From Overture and Incidental Music to
A Midsummer Night's Dream, Op. 21 and Op.

61 Overture, Op. 21

No. 5 Intermezzo, Op. 61

No. 7 Nocturne, Op. 61

No. 1 Scherzo, Op. 61

Avner Dorman

Violin Concerto No. 2, 'Nigunim'

I. Adagio religioso

II. Scherzo

III. Adagio

IV. Presto

INTERMISSION

Aaron Copland

Appalachian Spring Suite

Guest Artists:

Lara St. John, *violin*

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This program runs approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes, including a 20-minute intermission.

MEET LARA ST. JOHN, NICOLAS ELLIS AND LONDON SYMPHONIA MUSICIANS AFTER THE CONCERT

Join us in the Great Room immediately behind the stage. Reception generously sponsored by Beverley Zaifman.

TONIGHT'S MUSICIANS

Violin 1

Joe Lanza
Andrew Chung
Mikela Witjes
Julian Trippell*
Calvin Tsang
Peter Carter

Violin 2

Sarah Wiebe
Andrew Bensler
Alyssa Stevenson
Yanet Campbell-Secades*
Sheilanne Lindsay

Viola

Kelvin Enns
Lincoln St. John*
Marie-Eve Lessard
John Wiebe

Cello

Ben Bolt-Martin
Abigail Greenland*
Patrick Theriault

Bass

Joe Phillips
Iris Leck*

Flute

Laura Chambers
Stephen Tam

Oboe

Jennifer Short
Paul Goeglein

Clarinet

Graham Lord
Timothy Tse

Bassoon

Julie Shier
Kevin Harris

Horn

Ron George
Kate Stone

Trumpet

Shawn Spicer
Scott Harrison

Trombone

Mike Polci
Rob Stone

Timpani

Tim Francom

Percussion

Dave Robilliard
Graham Hargrove

Harp

Alanna Ellison

Piano

Dan Luong

*London Symphonia Fellows from Western University

Latecomers and those seeking to re-enter the concert hall will be asked to wait until a suitable break in the music. Timing and initial seating location is at the discretion of the ushers and Front of House staff.

Photography and video/audio recording of any kind is not permitted during the performance.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

London Symphonia wishes to acknowledge and honour the land on which we are meeting as the traditional territory of the First Nations peoples: the Chippewa of the Thames First Nation (part of the Anishinaabe), the Oneida Nation of the Thames (part of the Haudenosaunee) and the Munsee-Delaware Nation (part of the Leni-Lunaape). Let us reflect on how we as individuals and as a community can carry this spirit of gratitude into everything we do to honour the work that all the First Nations peoples of the Turtle Island have done, and continue to do, for the land that supports us all.



Photo Credit: Adrienne Lloyd

LARA ST. JOHN

Canadian-born violinist Lara St. John has been described as “something of a phenomenon” by *The Strad* and a “high-powered soloist” by *The New York Times*.

She has performed as soloist with the orchestras of Cleveland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, the Boston Pops, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, NDR Symphony, Zurich Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Strasbourg Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony, Camerata Ireland, Belgrade Symphony, Amsterdam Symphony, and the Akbank Chamber Orchestra in Turkey, among others.

Lara has also performed with the Queensland Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony, ACO², Auckland Philharmonia, Tokyo Symphony, Kyoto Symphony, Yomiuri Nippon Symphony, Hong Kong Philharmonic, China Philharmonic, Hangzhou Symphony and Shanghai Symphony.

She has traveled to Latin America for appearances with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela, the São Paulo Symphony, Rio de Janeiro’s Orquestra Sinfonica Brasileira, Orquestra Filarmônica de Minas Gerais, Orquestra Sinfónica Nacional del Ecuador, Orquestra Sinfónica Nacional de México, the SODRE in Montevideo, and the Sociedad Filarmónica de Lima in Peru.

Recitals in major concert halls have included New York, Boston, San Francisco, Ravinia, Wolf Trap, Washington, D.C., Prague, Berlin, Toronto, Montreal, Bogotá, Lima and the Forbidden City. Lara has commissioned or premiered new works by an array of prominent composers, including Matthew Hindson, Martin Kennedy, John Corigliano, Gene Pritsker, Serouj Kradjian, Tarik O’Regan and John Psathas.

Upcoming performances will include the Filarmónica de Buenos Aires, the Estonian National Symphony and the Royal Conservatory in Toronto.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “Lara St. John happens to be a volcanic violinist with a huge, fabulous tone that pours out of her like molten lava. She has technique to burn and plays at a constant high heat.”

Lara owns and runs her own label, Ancalagon, which she founded in 1999. Her recording of *Bach: The Six Sonatas & Partitas for Violin Solo* was the best-selling double album on iTunes in 2007. Her 2008 world premiere recording of Matthew Hindson’s Violin Concerto prompted Gramophone to write, “It’s the sort of work that should get audiences running, not walking, back to concert halls on new- music nights.”

In 2009, American Record Guide said of her Vivaldi/Piazzolla disc with the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra: “I can imagine no suaver, more atmospheric performance.” Her *Mozart* recording with The Knights won a Juno Award in 2011.

In 2014, her Schubert album with Berlin Philharmonic principal harpist Marie- Pierre Langlamet, principal cellist Ludwig Quandt and soprano Anna Prohaska was chosen as one of “the best CDs of spring” by *Der Tagesspiegel*, and *MDR Figaro* recommended it for its “boundless enchantment.”

Her 2016 release of *Shiksa*, an album of reimagined folk music, with pianist Matt Herskowitz, received a five-star review from *All About Jazz*: “Music like this is beyond imagination and talent. It exists only in the loosely held molecules found on the razor’s edge of creation.” Her *Key of A* recording of sonatas by Beethoven and Franck in 2019 prompted *Audiophile Audition* to write, “You will want this disc; you need this disc, and it provides an hour of exceptional pleasure and illuminating insight into the worlds of two very different composers.”

In 2022, she released *she/her/hers*, an album of solo violin works written by women. *The Wall Street Journal* praised it for broadening the classical music canon and noted that “the composers’ varied cultural moorings yield a striking breadth of accents.”

Lara has produced, edited and performed in more than 30 music videos. Among these, “Czardashian Rhapsody” won “best music video” at the Toronto International Short Film Festival in 2017.

In 2019, Lara revealed to reporters at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that she had been abused and raped by a professor at the Curtis Institute of Music when she was 14 years old, and that the institution subsequently covered up the crimes. As a result of the *Inquirer* article, she heard from many other survivors of abuse at the hands of music teachers, conductors and colleagues. She is now in the process of making a documentary film on this subject.

In 2021 Lara was invested with the Order of Canada by the Governor General of Canada on behalf of Queen Elizabeth, for service to society and innovations that “ignite our imaginations.”

Additionally in 2021, she programmed and produced the Atterbury House Sessions, a free, live-streamed series of 12 concerts celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Atterbury House, an iconic architectural gem on the Upper East Side of New York City. She initiated the series to provide an outlet for her colleagues in light of the daunting challenges posed to the performing arts by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lara has been featured in *People*, *US News and World Report*, on CNN’s “Showbiz Today,” NPR’s “All Things Considered,” the CBC, the BBC, in a Bravo! special: “Live at the Rehearsal Hall,” and twice on the cover of *Strings magazine*.

She began playing the violin when she was two years old. She made her first appearance as soloist with orchestra at age four, and her European debut with the Gulbenkian Orchestra when she was 10. She toured Spain, France, Portugal and Hungary at ages 12 and 13 and entered the Curtis Institute at 13. She pursued further studies at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, the Mannes College of Music and the New England Conservatory. Her teachers have included Felix Galimir and Joey Corpus.

Lara owns and performs on the 1779 “ex-Salubue” by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini. She is fluent in English, French and Spanish.

Lara St. John, Personal Direction:
Judson Management Group, Inc.,
131 E. 70th Street, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10021,
Telephone: (212) 974-1917
Lara St. John records for Ancalagon Records.



Photo Credit: Kevin Calixte

NICOLAS ELLIS

Nicolas Ellis is the Music Director of the Orchestre National de Bretagne, Principal Guest Conductor of Les Violons du Roy, as well as Artistic Director and Conductor of the Orchestre de l'Agora, which he founded in Montreal in 2013.

Known for his versatility in a vast repertoire, Nicolas has distinguished himself with the Orchestre de l'Agora by conceiving concerts with a dramaturgical approach. In collaboration with the Opéra de Montréal, the Agora has presented several opera projects in atypical venues in Montreal, including *The Turn of the Screw*, which took place in an industrial warehouse, and *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, presented at the Théâtre le Paradoxe, a church converted into a performance space that offers arts training to marginalized youths. In addition, concerts such as “Electra and Iphigenia” featuring the music of Mozart, Gluck, and Haydn with soprano Karina Gauvin, and Bach, “le voyage éphémère”, used unique lighting effects to create immersive musical experiences for a wide variety of audiences. Alongside the Orchestre de l'Agora, Nicolas won a JUNO award in the Classical Album of the Year, Large Ensemble category for the album *Viola Borealis* featuring violist Marina Thibeault. Agora also won the Opus Prize for Musical Event of the Year for the Gala de la Terre featuring Mahler's 3rd Symphony, a major fundraising event for several environmental organizations. The eclecticism of Agora's repertoire, as well as the talent and curiosity of its musicians, constitute the core of the ensemble's artistic identity, as demonstrated by its recent critically acclaimed productions of Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* and the contemporary music showcase titled “Big Bang”. In keeping with the Agora's outreach mission, Nicolas has set up musical creation projects with teenagers coping

with mental illness, educational workshops for children, and a series of monthly concerts for the inmates at the Bordeaux Prison in Montreal.

Nicolas is one of the most active conductors on the Canadian scene. He has been invited to conduct the Vancouver Symphony, the National Arts Centre Orchestra, the I Musici de Montréal Chamber Orchestra, the Orchestre Symphonique de Québec, the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony, the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra, Symphony Nova Scotia, and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens. In 2023-2024, he made his American debut with the San Diego Symphony. He also conducted *Le Nozze di Figaro* at the Opéra de Montréal and *Die Fledermaus* at the Opéra de Québec and opened the 2024 Festival de Lanaudière with the Orchestra de l'Agora and was guest conducting with Tampere Philharmonic, Luxembourg Philharmonic, Sydney Symphony, Orchestre Métropolitain, and Edmonton Symphony. He also conducted *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* at Opera de Montreal and *Magic Flute* at Opera de Rennes.

Among the musical encounters and projects that have strongly influenced him are his former position as Artistic Collaborator of the Orchestre Métropolitain and Yannick Nézet-Séguin from 2018 to 2023 and his role as assistant conductor to Raphaël Pichon and the Ensemble Pygmalion in opera productions at the Opéra comique, the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and the Salzburg Festival.

Nicolas Ellis received the 2017 Fernand Lindsay Career Grant, was named Radio-Canada's revelation of the year 2018-2019, and was also awarded the Prix Goyer Mécénat Musica 2021.



Photo Credit: Felix Grünshlo

AVNER DORMAN

Avner Dorman writes music of intricate craftsmanship and rigorous technique, expressed with a soulful and singular voice. A native of Israel now living in the United States, Dorman draws on various cultural and

historical influences in composing, resulting in music that affects an emotional impact while exploring new territories. His music utilizes an exciting and complex rhythmic vocabulary, as well as unique timbres and colors in orchestral, chamber, and solo settings; many of his compositions have become contemporary staples in the repertoire.

Dorman's music is championed by renowned conductors such as Zubin Mehta, Christoph Eschenbach, Ricardo Chailly, and Andris Nelsons, and soloists such as Pinchas Zukerman, Gil Shaham, Martin Grubinger, and Hilary Hahn. His music has been commissioned and performed by some of the world's leading orchestras, such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra, The Cleveland Orchestra, NDR Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the San Francisco Symphony.

The 2025–2026 season brings major world and country premieres alongside performances across Europe, Asia, and the United States. Highlights include the world premiere of *New Orleans Mix* for piano and wind quintet by Ensemble 4.1 at the Harvard Musical Association (October 2025), and the world premiere of Dorman's *Inner Fire* (Cello Concerto No. 2), written for Kristina Reiko Cooper and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. In Asia, Gil Shaham, Adele Anthony, and Sejong Soloists gave the Korean premiere of *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* in Seoul, while in Europe the Berlin Academy of American Music presented the Romanian premiere of *Tanyaderas* at the George Enescu Festival.

Other season highlights include *Child's Play* in Göppingen, Germany; multiple European performances of *In Flux* (Trio Colores with the Jugendsinfonie Orchester Zürich) in Bremen, Potsdam, Berlin, and Zurich; *Frozen in Time* in Hamburg, Zagreb, Málaga, Salzburg, and again at the Elbphilharmonie in spring 2026; *Udarep Akubrad* with the Wave Quartet in Magdeburg; and *Spices, Perfumes, Toxins!* in Vienna in a new two-pianos and percussion arrangement. In the United States, upcoming performances include *Jerusalem Mix* in Harrisburg, PA; *Eternal Rhythm* in New Bedford, MA; and the Rochester Philharmonic's performances of *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance*, featuring Gil Shaham and Adele Anthony under Andreas Delfs.

During the 2024–2025 season, Dorman's music was heard worldwide in major premieres and revivals. These included the world premiere of *In Flux* by Trio Colores and the Braunschweig Symphony, the world premiere of *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* by Gil Shaham, Adele Anthony, and the Santa Barbara Symphony with Nir Kabaretti (later featured at the Aspen Music Festival), and the UK premiere of his opera *Wahnfried* at the Longborough Festival, which received rave reviews. Other highlights included the Israeli premiere of his Concerto for Mandolin, Guitar, and Orchestra, the return of *Die Kinder Des Sultans* to Dortmund Opera, and new works for piano and youth orchestra.

Dorman's music has garnered numerous awards and prizes, including Israel's prestigious Prime Minister's Award for his *Ellef* Symphony, and international awards from ASCAP, ACUM, and the Asian Composers League. His music is available on Naxos, Deutsche Grammophon, Canary Classics, and other labels. Dorman studied composition with John Corigliano and Josef Bardanashvili, and he holds a doctorate in composition from the Juilliard School. Dorman currently serves as Associate Professor of Music Theory and Composition at the Sunderman Conservatory of Music at Gettysburg College.



COMPOSER'S NOTE

Avner Dorman

Violin Concerto No. 2, 'Nigunim'

The *Nigun* is a fundamental musical concept of traditional Jewish music. According to Habbad literature, the *Nigun* serves as a universal language; it ascends beyond words and conveys a deeper spiritual message than words can; a *Nigun* sung in Yiddish will reach and affect someone who only speaks Arabic and vice versa. The *Nigun* may be short but since it begins and ends on the same pitch it may be repeated over and over. In this sense, the *Nigun* has no beginning and no end and is eternal. *Nigunim* (the plural of *Nigun*) may be secular or religious, fast or slow, and may be sung and played in a variety of social events and circumstances.

When the 92 Street Y and Orli and Gil Shaham approached me to write a new piece for their Jewish Melodies program, my first thought was to write a piece that would explore the music of the ten lost tribes (the Hebrew tribes that were exiled after the first temple was destroyed). Since we know very little about the whereabouts of these tribes, I decided to explore the music of various Jewish traditions from different parts of the world and how they relate to larger local musical traditions.

To my surprise, after researching Jewish music from different parts of the world, I found that there are some common musical elements to North African Jewish cantillations, Central Asian Jewish wedding songs, Klezmer music, and Ashkenazy prayers. Though I did not use any existing Jewish melodies for *Nigunim*, the main modes and melodic gestures of the piece are drawn from these common elements. Moreover, different sections of the piece draw upon local non-Jewish musical traditions of each of these regions: for example, the second movement uses principles found in Georgian folk rhythms and harmonies, and the fourth is inspired by Macedonian dances.

PROGRAM NOTES

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847)

Overture and Incidental Music to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Opp.21 and 61

Oberon: Through the house give glimmering light,
By the dead and drowsy fire,
Every elf and fairy sprite
Hop as light as bird from brier;
And this ditty, after me,
Sing and dance it trippingly.
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, 386-91)

Bottom: I have a reasonable good ear in music.
Let's have the tongs and the bones.
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act IV, i, 30)

Of the many teenaged prodigies of musical composition – including Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Rossini – it was Mendelssohn who soonest achieved the summit of his art in works fully deserving the appellation “masterpiece”. In fact, the present Overture and the even earlier Octet for strings are usually given pride of place at the top of his entire life's work. They were produced in a year's span, between the summers of 1825 and 1826, and their astonishing originality propelled the seventeen-year-old genius to the forefront of European musical attention.

What kindled Mendelssohn's imagination in both cases was poetry (Goethe's “Walpurgis Night” in the case of the Octet and Shakespeare's comedy in that of the Overture) in which fairies or evil spirits played a prominent role. Their fleet-yet-feather-light portrayal, with softly scampering violins in four closely written parts, note-against-note, henceforth became the composer's trademark. The encapsulation of a play in a concert overture had been anticipated by Beethoven in his *Coriolan*, but

Mendelssohn's wealth of charming pictorial detail (such as the braying of the donkey-headed Bottom) was a new wrinkle, one which was to lead eventually to the development of the symphonic poem.

The overture was conceived as a stand-alone work, but its success led 17 years later to a request to provide incidental music for the play itself, and the composer obliged with seamless skill to recreate the sound world of his youth in 13 new numbers. At that time he wrote of his overture, “It follows the play closely... the fairy rulers, Oberon and Titania, appear throughout the play with all their people... after the principal players have joyfully left the stage, the elves follow them, bless the house and disappear with the dawn.”

Mendelssohn's incidental music includes several songs and choruses, as well as some underscore to the dialogue (melodrama). The purely orchestral numbers selected for tonight's performance are:

No.5 Intermezzo: after the 2nd act. Hermia, seeking her love Lysander, loses herself in the wood (“Either death or you I'll find immediately”). Her restless agitation is captured brilliantly in an interlacing dialogue between two groups, the first violins with oboes and the flutes with clarinets, whose fragments form a continuous melodic line over the troubled tremolo of the inner strings. Menacing interjections of forest cellos and basses threaten, transitioning to **Entry of the Rude**

Mechanicals (preceding the 3rd act: the tradesmen who are to entertain Theseus, Duke of Athens and his bride Hippolyta on their wedding day meet in the wood to rehearse their play in the moonlight).

No.7 Nocturne (after the 3rd act): The quarrelling lovers Hermia and Lysander have fallen asleep on the forest floor; the good fairy Puck applies his magic balm to Lysander's eyes to resolve their discord:

On the ground
Sleep sound:
I'll apply
To your eye
Gentle lover, remedy.

The extended French horn solo, closely accompanied by a pair of bassoons, is rightly considered one of the gems of the orchestral repertory for the instrument. Between its two iterations a section marked 'agitato' by Mendelssohn suggests the lovers' dreams are not entirely peaceful.

No.1 Scherzo (after the 1st act) sets the mood for the 2nd act and the initial appearance of the spirits of the wood.

A Fairy: Over hill, over dale
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,
Thorough flood, thorough fire,
I do wander everywhere
Swifter than the moon's sphere...

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Suite (1970) from *Appalachian Spring* (*Ballet for Martha*)

"In my opinion Appalachian Spring is Copland's masterpiece, because it fused his spirit with America's--and this is a very rare occurrence in any art form."

- Composer/Conductor Jonathan Sheffer

It was a frequent source of amusement to Copland that after hearing his most successful work listeners would commend him for having made them "just feel spring and just see the Appalachians." He observed, "But when I wrote

the ballet I had no idea what Martha [Graham] was going to call it! Even after people learn that I didn't know the ballet title when I wrote the music, they still tell me they can see the Appalachians and feel spring. Well, I'm willing if they are!"

The gestation of *Appalachian Spring* began in mid-1942 when philanthropist Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge underwrote two short ballets for American modern dancer and choreographer Martha Graham (1894-1991), to be performed in autumn 1943. Copland accepted his commission (along with the Mexican Carlos Chávez) subject to his receiving a suitable scenario. However, Graham's performance schedule and Copland's involvement with a Hollywood movie (*The North Star*) meant their collaboration was largely conducted by mail. Graham's first outline was uncongenial to the composer, and while the second, which arrived in May 1943, was acceptable, delays in the movie's production made it impossible for Copland to work much on it. To Mrs. Coolidge's displeasure the premiere had to be postponed (for both ballets: Chávez was even further behind schedule with his).

Copland's biographers disagree on details of the myriad and radical revisions that Graham's scenario underwent. First called "Daughter of Colchis" with overtones of Medea, and then "House of Victory" with references to the Civil War, the later versions simply had "Name?" scrawled at the top, and Copland for his own convenience titled his score "Ballet for Martha". But he had enough to work with: "I knew certain crucial things – that it had to do with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope. I thought about that in combination with the special quality of Martha's own personality, her talents as a dancer... and the basic simplicity of her art... There's something prim and restrained, a strong quality about her, that one tends to think of as American." And he had the comfort of Graham's letter of July 1943: "Once the music comes I never look at the script. It is only to make a working base... So please feel free to let the music take its own life and urge."

Copland completed his score in June 1944, orchestrated it in July and sent it off in August; the premiere was set for October 30. When he arrived at the Library of Congress for the dress rehearsal he asked Graham “‘Martha, what have you called the ballet?’ She replied, ‘Appalachian Spring’. ‘What a pretty title. Where did you get it?’ I asked, and Martha said, ‘Well, actually it’s from a line in a poem by Hart Crane.’ I asked, ‘Does the poem itself have anything to do with your ballet?’ ‘No’, said Martha, ‘I just liked the title and used it.’”

In fact, in Crane’s poem (*The Bridge*) the line “O, Appalachian Spring” is addressed to a stream of water... but the Great Artist takes what is necessary to his creation, as they say.

Copland was further surprised to find that the ballet’s scenario had metamorphosed even more, using his music in unexpected ways: “For example, music originally conceived for children at play was used for the Revivalist’s dance.” But he accepted that the score was Graham’s to use as she wished, “... and it doesn’t bother me a bit, especially if it works.”

Right from the outset the consensus of critics and public has been that it works very well. The bold, original choreography and folk-tinged expressive music reinforced American values at a time when war made the country unusually receptive, but they transcend their time. The ballet itself became a Martha Graham signature piece – it remains in the repertory of the Martha Graham Dance Company – while in 1945 the score was awarded the Pulitzer Prize as well as a New York Critics Circle Award (“Winning an award from the music critics was the biggest surprise of all,” Copland observed dryly, “after having been lambasted by those gentlemen so frequently through the years!”).

Theatre dimensions, as well as the terms of the commission, restricted the number of musicians Copland could use, but with *Appalachian Spring*’s success he extracted a suite in 1945 and scored it for full orchestra. In this form it became a concert staple;

however, in 1970 the composer was persuaded that his original version for 13 instruments (double string quartet, bass, flute, clarinet, bassoon and piano) was valid in its own right, and consequently he reissued the suite alternatively in its earlier instrumentation. A middle route sees this manifestation performed with the solo string parts taken by orchestral string sections.

The centerpiece of the score is a set of variations on the Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts” (presented by the clarinet), the only actual folk melody used; Copland’s slight alteration of the tune is now more familiar than the original. The Shakers – an 18th century Quaker sect all but extinct by the 20th due to its strict celibacy (membership was by conversion, indenture or adoption) – got their name from their ecstatic use of music and dance in worship. In the 1930s the Shakers were of increased interest to the political left because of the communitarian order of their society, and to others because of the rustic simplicity of their furniture (however, interest in celibacy seems to have remained flat).

Graham’s ballet evokes New England fundamentalism more than Shakerism per se, although it does employ a stylized Shaker chair as part of the set. Her synopsis adumbrates settler life in a Pennsylvania spring “celebrated by a man and woman building a house with joy and love and prayer; by a revivalist and his followers in their shouts of exaltation; by a pioneering woman with her dreams of the Promised Land.” The suite follows the action, omitting a hellfire sermon by the Revivalist. The characters (Bride and Husbandman, Revivalist and Flock, and Pioneering Woman) take their places on stage to the building of a quiet chord; excitement over their wedding, and anticipation and fears for the couple’s future are expressed; the Revivalist and his flock do an ecstatic barn-dance; the return of the opening underscores the brief ceremony, and to “Simple Gifts” the couple celebrate their happiness. Prayer follows, and all leave the newlyweds to face their future as the quiet chord of the opening fades.

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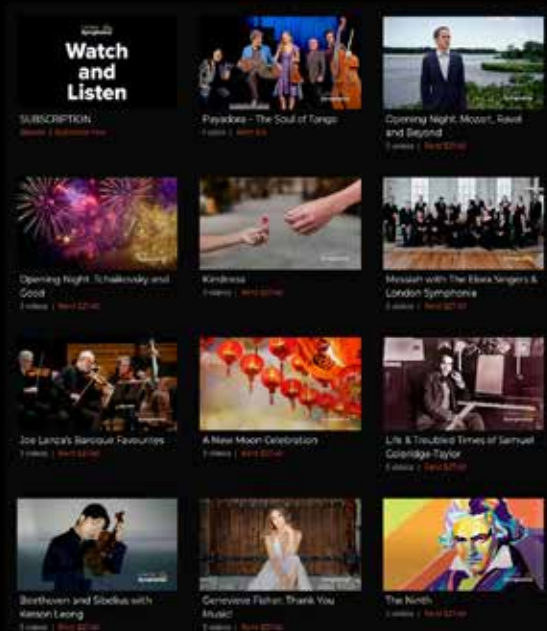
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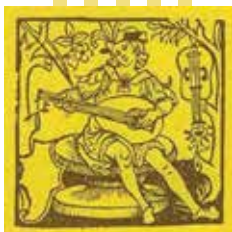
October 4, 2025 **Opening Night: Mozart, Ravel and Beyond**
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April 18, 2026 **The Brahms Effect with Tom Allen**, *narrator*,
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In addition, we sponsor a free concert at the Don Wright Faculty of Music on Friday, November 14, 12:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. von Kuster Hall, Western University. With the Musicians from Marlboro.

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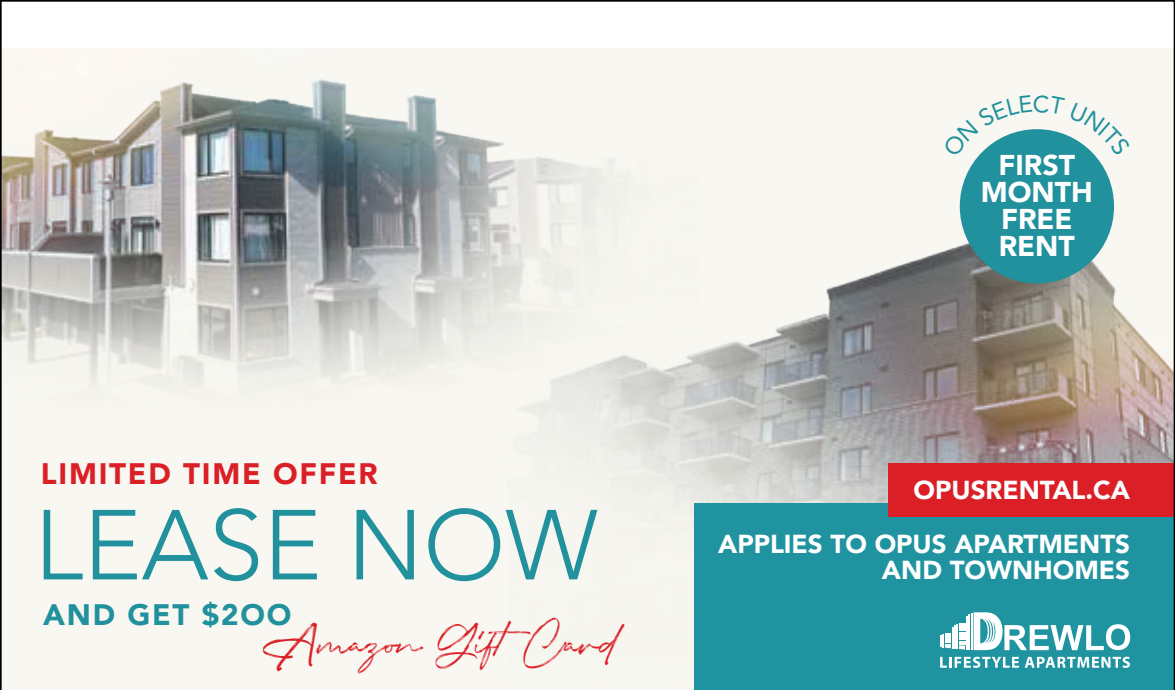
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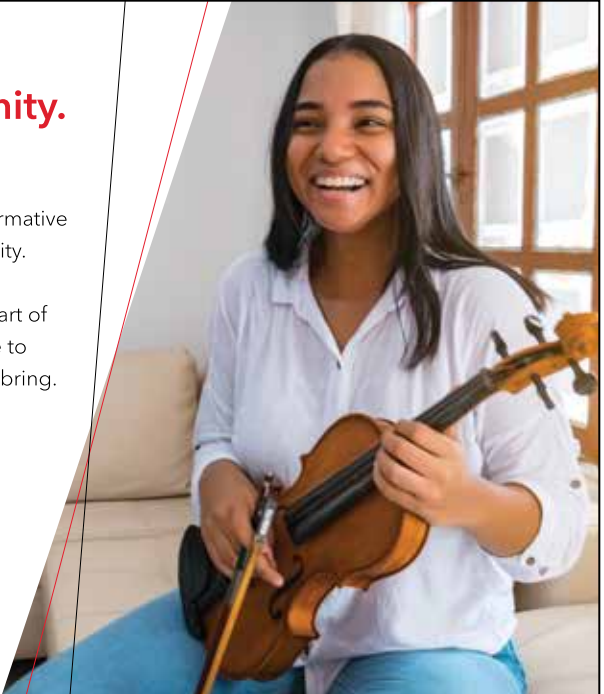
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