

# MICHAEL ABELS: *Delights & Dances*

Notes on the Program

By Noel Morris ©2021

A portrait of Michael Abels, an African-American man with a grey beard and mustache, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark jacket over a dark shirt. The background is a dark, textured blue.

**M**ichael Abels, an African-American composer best known for combining classical music with African-American jazz, blues, bluegrass and ethnic genres, has gained widespread recognition for his orchestral music. Abels studied at the University of Southern California, where he explored his African-American roots by examining gospel music and African drumming. Later, he studied West African music at California Institute for the Arts. Abels received two Meet the Composer (now New Music USA) grants, one of which allowed him to work with young musicians through the Watts Tower Arts Center in Los Angeles, as well as commissions and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the LA Opera and many orchestras.

*Delights & Dances*, commissioned by Sphinx, captivates listeners with witty, soulful, and infectious rhythmic music. A *New York Times* review described the piece as “an energetic arrangement . . . which incorporates jazz, blues, bluegrass and Latin dance elements.”

From the Composer:

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***Delights & Dances* showcases a quartet of string soloists in a kind of diptych of American musical genres, one regarded as “black” and the other “white.”** The piece begins with a slow, lyrical introduction that grows from a cello solo into a duet with the viola, culminating in a gentle crescendo for the full quartet. The first major section is a blues, which allows the soloists to flaunt their musical talents through a series of solos that are designed to sound improvised, although they are actually notated. The second half of the piece is a rousing bluegrass hoedown, once again featuring the quartet as they trade riffs back in forth (in a way that might recall “Dueling Banjos”) which culminates in a boisterous coda. It’s a piece that celebrates musicians playing together. I hope it fills you with joy.”

**MICHAEL ABELS: *Delights & Dances***

**This is an ASO premiere.**

Instrumentation: **String orchestra**

# CLARICE ASSAD: The Book of Spells

From the Composer:

“ I have long been intrigued by anything unexplained with pure logic, so occult themes, witchcraft, and the fantasy world have long been companions of my imagination. *The Book of Spells* is a three-movement composition inspired by rituals that deal with magic, which is done to achieve a particular goal, righteous or wicked. Each movement explores a rite and follows the reasoning of a book I came across. The chapter sections are thematic, each focusing on assorted areas of interest: Chapter one deals with matters of the heart (Love and Relationship); Chapter Two is about bringing wealth and prosperity into one's lives. Chapter Three is about Health and well-being. Within each chapter, hundreds of spells teach the practitioner how to prepare and perform the rites, each for a particular purpose.”

**CLARICE ASSAD: The Book of Spells**

**This is a world premiere.**

Instrumentation: **flute, oboe, clarinet, harp, viola**





## BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 3

**I**n 1787, the Emperor's brother agreed to sponsor 16-year-old Beethoven on a major excursion: the boy would go to Vienna to study with the great musical celebrity Mozart. At that point, Beethoven was already handy as a church organist, a rehearsal pianist, and a string player and harpsichordist in the court orchestra. He was especially dazzling at the piano, a relatively new invention which had only recently become widespread.

In March, the teenager climbed into a coach and made the nearly three-week-long journey to the Austrian capital. It's possible he met Mozart (reports are unconfirmed), but a message followed him there: his mother lay dying.

Beethoven hurried home, making it back in time to say goodbye. He remained in Bonn for another five years until he, again, received a grant to travel to Vienna. By that time, Mozart had died, and Haydn was to be his teacher — not a particularly good fit. The two composers had a series of strained meetings, but the taste of success quickly turned Beethoven's head.

Almost immediately, he was teaching and performing in palaces around Vienna. The noble houses gleefully opened their doors to him. Gaining a reputation for thundering piano playing, he wrote

piles of piano music to show it off. It wasn't until 1800, more than seven years later, that he organized his first public performance before the Viennese. Billed as a concert "for his own benefit," Beethoven premiered his First Symphony, conducted music by Haydn and Mozart, and played one of his own piano concertos. He had intended to premiere his Third Piano Concerto that night, but the piece wasn't ready (and it wouldn't be for another three years).

At 8:00 in the morning, on April 5, 1803, Beethoven assembled a ragtag orchestra and chorus and began a rehearsal. A grueling ten-hour affair, the rehearsal ended shortly before the doors opened for the 6:00 concert. Beethoven, himself, would play the solo part of his Third Piano Concerto alongside Ignaz von Seyfried, a young conductor who was given the task of turning pages for the composer. Seyfried left the following account:



*I saw almost nothing but empty leaves; at the most, on one page or another a few Egyptian hieroglyphs, wholly unintelligible to me, were scribbled down to serve as clues for him; for he played nearly all of the solo part from memory since, as was so often the case, he had not had time to set it all down on paper. He gave me a secret glance whenever he was at the end of one of the invisible passages, and my scarcely concealable anxiety not to miss the decisive moment amused him greatly and he laughed heartily during the jovial supper which we ate afterwards.*

### BEETHOVEN: Piano Concerto No. 3

First ASO Performance: **JAN 18, 1951** | **Henry Sopkin**, conductor

Most Recent ASO Performance: **FEB 3, 2018** | **Robert Spano**, conductor | **Jorge Federico Osorio**, piano

Instrumentation: **2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, timpani, strings**

# BRITTEN: Sinfonietta

**B**enjamin Britten was born in the coastal town of Lowestoft overlooking the North Sea. His mother was an amateur singer who hosted musical evenings in the home, and served as his first music teacher. A precocious boy with a shock of curly hair, young Benjamin began composing around the age of five and produced dozens of works. He later recounted a pivotal moment in his early life:

*As a child I heard little music outside my home. There were the local choral society concerts and the very occasional chamber concert, but the main event was the Norwich Triennial Festival. There in 1924, when I was 10, I heard Frank Bridge conduct his suite "The Sea," and was knocked sideways.*

In 1927, young Benjamin's viola teacher arranged for a meeting between Bridge and the boy Britten, and they "got on splendidly." Britten began taking lessons from Bridge, commuting to the composer's homes in Eastbourne and London. Britten wrote:

*At tea-time Mrs. Bridge came in and said, "Really, you must give the boy a break." Often I used to end these marathons in tears; not that he was beastly to me, but the concentrated strain was too much for me. I was perhaps too young to take in so much at the time, but I found later that a good deal of it had stuck firmly.*

Musically, Bridge was aligned with the more experimental composers on the continent, rather than the nationalistic, folk music-inspired composers in England. When young Britten entered the Royal College of Music in 1930, he struggled to find his voice, and complained about the stifling conservatism of his teachers.

He wrote his Sinfonietta for string quintet at age 18 in 1932. Publishing the piece as his Opus 1, he dedicated it, not to his professors at the College, but to Frank Bridge. He dropped out of school before his twentieth birthday, and rescored the Sinfonietta for small orchestra in 1936.

