

# MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS: *Street Song* for Brass Ensemble

## Notes on the Program

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

**M**ichael Tilson Thomas — conductor, composer, pianist, educator and orchestra founder — is one of America's most gifted musicians. Born Michael Tomashevsky in Los Angeles in 1944 into an artistic family (his paternal grandparents, Boris and Bessie, founded the Yiddish Theater in New York City), Tilson Thomas studied composition and conducting with Ingolf Dahl, piano with John Crown and harpsichord with Alice Ehlers at the University of Southern California. During his four years at the school, he conducted the Young Musicians Foundation Debut Orchestra as well as Los Angeles' adventurous Monday Evening Concerts, where he worked with Stravinsky, Boulez, Stockhausen and Copland on performances of their works. A number of significant events clustered around his graduation in 1967: he served as pianist for the master classes of Heifetz and Piatigorsky at USC; in 1966, he studied at Bayreuth with Friedelind Wagner, the composer's granddaughter; in 1967, he was Boulez's assistant at the Ojai Festival (he returned to conduct there in 1968, 1969 and 1973); in 1968, he won the Koussevitzky Prize as a conducting student at Tanglewood; and in 1969, he was appointed Assistant Conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the youngest person ever to hold that post.

He shot to international prominence on October 22, 1969, when he substituted mid-concert for the ailing William Steinberg, Music Director of the BSO, at a performance in New York's Philharmonic Hall; he was promoted to Associate Conductor the following year. Important positions accumulated quickly thereafter: Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic (1971–

1979), conductor of the New York Philharmonic's Young People's Concerts (1971–1974), Principal Guest Conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1981–1985), Music Director of the Great Woods Performing Arts Center (1986–1989), Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra (1988–1995). In 1988, Tilson Thomas founded the Miami-based New World Symphony Orchestra to train young professional musicians; he continues to serve as its Artistic Director.

In 1990, he established the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan with Leonard Bernstein, and was its Artistic Director for the next ten years. In 1995, he was appointed Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony, where he balanced the tradition orchestral repertory with a vast range of works from current and earlier generations of American composers during his 25-year tenure; he became Music Director Laureate of the SFS in June 2020. As a pianist, he has made critically acclaimed recordings of music by Gershwin and Stravinsky. Michael Tilson Thomas' many honors include twelve Grammy Awards, President's Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, Columbia University's Ditson Award for Services to American Music, American Music Center's Letter of Distinction, Peabody Award for his radio series for SFS Media titled *The MTT Files*, *Musical America's* 1995 Conductor of the Year Award, National Public Radio's *Performance Today* Player of the Year Award in 1999, and *Chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres* of France. In 2009, President Barack Obama presented Tilson Thomas with the National Medal of Arts.



Michael Tilson Thomas is also a talented composer whose works include: *From the Diary of Anne Frank* for Narrator and Orchestra (1990, commissioned by UNICEF and premiered in Philadelphia by the late Audrey Hepburn and the New World Symphony); *Shōwa/Shoáh* (1995, commissioned by the city of Hiroshima in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of that city's bombing); *Three Poems by Walt Whitman* for Baritone and Orchestra (1999); *Urban Legend* for Contrabassoon and Percussion (2002); and *Poems of Emily Dickinson* for soprano Renée Fleming (2002). His most recent work, *Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind*, received its premiere in Miami in April 2016 with the New World Symphony and soprano Measha Brueggergosman.


*Street Song* was composed in 1988 for the Empire Brass, "some of my earliest musical friends," according to the composer.

“ Our meeting dates back to student days at Tanglewood when we all discovered that we had knowledge and reverence for good notes, good tunes and good licks, whether from organum, gamelan, serialism or latter-day be-bop. *Street Song* is a simple, nostalgic, street-corner sort of piece. It is the riffs of guys from a neighborhood somewhere between Bali and Bulgaria. It has no special effects, it has only notes that are the souvenirs of real places and real people.

*Street Song* is in three continuous parts — an interweaving of three songs. The first song opens with a jagged downward scale suspending in the air a sweetly dissonant harmony that very slowly resolves. This moment of resolution is followed by responses of various kinds. The harmonies move between the world of the Middle Ages and the present, between East and West, and always, of course, from the perspective of 20th-century America. Overall the movement is about starting and stopping, the moments of suspension always leading somewhere else.

The second song is introduced by a yodel-like horn solo. It is followed by a simple trumpet duet, which was first written around 1972. It is folk-like in character and also cadences with suspended moments of slowly resolving dissonance.

The third song is really more of a dance. It begins when the trombone slides a step higher, bringing the work into a jazzier swing. The harmonies here are the stacked-up moments of suspension from the first two parts of the piece. By now I hope these 'dissonant' sounds actually begin to sound 'consonant.' There is a resolution, but it is in the world of a musician who after many after-hours gigs greets the dawn. Finally, the three songs are brought together and the work moves toward a quiet close.”



## WILLIAM GRANT STILL: *Wood Notes*

Suite Inspired by the  
Poems of J. Mitchell Pilcher

### Notes on the Program

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

**W**illiam Grant Still, whom Nicolas Slonimsky in his authoritative *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* called "The Dean of Afro-American Composers," was born in Woodville, Mississippi on May 11, 1895. His father, the town bandmaster and a music teacher at Alabama A&M, died when the boy was an infant, and the family moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, where his mother, a graduate of Atlanta University, taught high school. In Little Rock, she married an opera buff, and he introduced young William to the great voices of the day on records and encouraged his interest in playing the violin. At the age of sixteen, Still matriculated as a medical student at Wilberforce University in Ohio, but he soon switched to music. He taught himself to play the reed instruments, and left school to perform in dance bands in the Columbus area and work for a brief period as an arranger for the great blues writer W.C. Handy. He returned to Wilberforce, graduated in 1915, married later that year, and then resumed playing in dance and theater orchestras.

In 1917, Still entered Oberlin College but he interrupted his studies the following year to serve in the Navy during World War I, first as a mess attendant and later as a violinist in officers' clubs. He went back to Oberlin after his service duty and stayed there until 1921, when he moved to New York to join the orchestra of the Noble Sissle-Eubie Blake revue *Shuffle Along* as an oboist. While on tour in Boston with the show, Still studied with George Chadwick, then President of the New England Conservatory, who was so impressed with

his talent that he provided his lessons free of charge. Back in New York, Still studied with Edgard Varèse and ran the Black Swan Recording Company for a period in the mid-1920s. He tried composing in Varèse's modernistic idiom, but soon abandoned that iconoclastic style in favor of a more traditional manner.

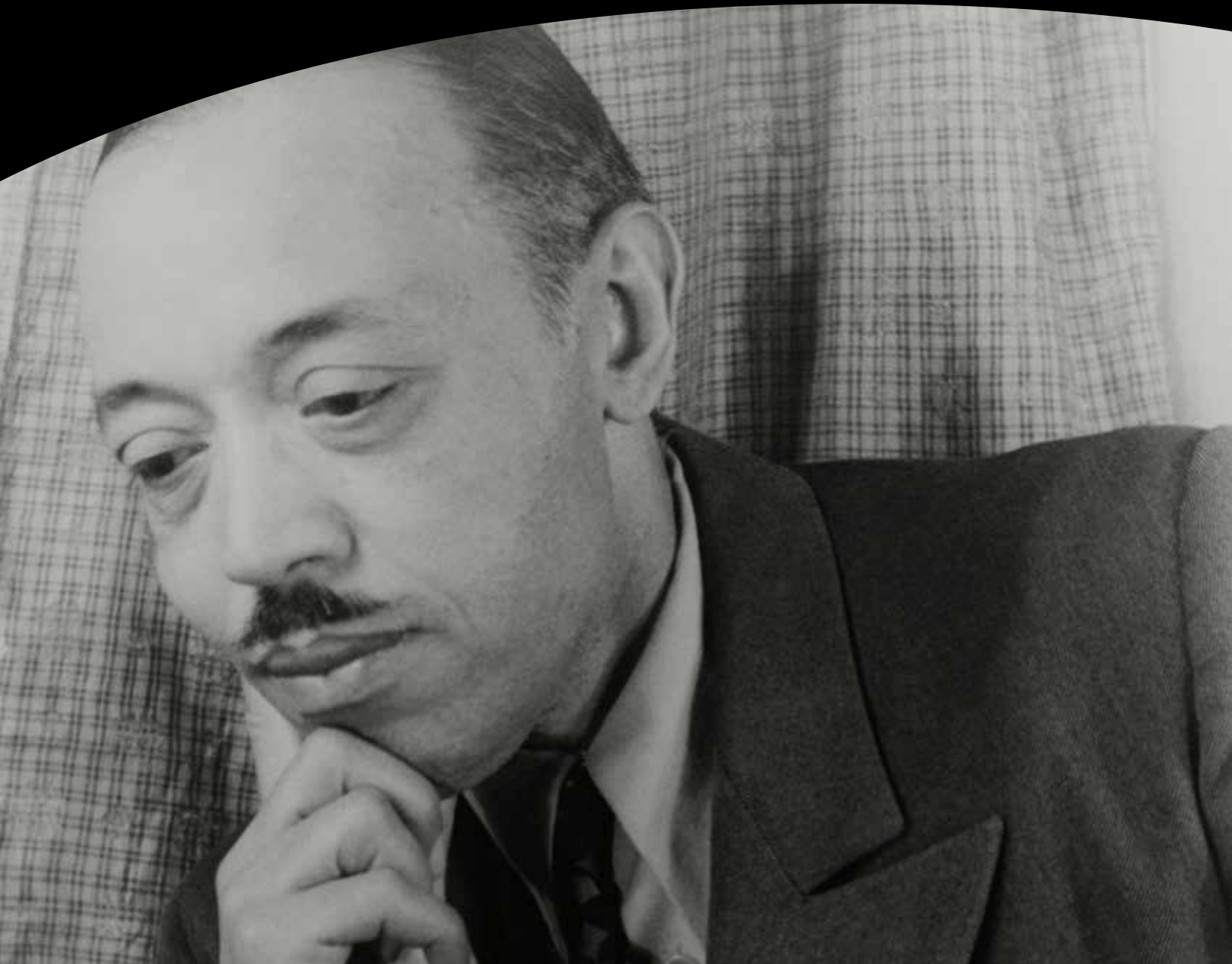
Still's work was recognized as early as 1928, when he received the Harmon Award for the most significant contribution to Black culture in America. His *Afro-American Symphony* of 1930 was premiered by Howard Hanson and the Rochester Philharmonic (the first such work by a Black composer played by a leading American orchestra) and heard thereafter in performances in Europe and South America. Unable to make a living from his concert compositions, however, Still worked as an arranger and orchestrator of music for radio, for Broadway shows, and for Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw and other popular bandleaders. A 1934 Guggenheim Fellowship allowed him to cut back on his commercial activities and write his first opera, *Blue Steel*, which incorporated jazz and spirituals. He continued to compose large-scale orchestral, instrumental and vocal works in his distinctive idiom during the following years, and after moving to Los Angeles in 1934, he supplemented that activity by writing and arranging music for films (including Frank Capra's 1937 *Lost Horizon*) and later for television (*Perry Mason*, *Gunsmoke*). Still continued to hold an important place in American music until his death in Los Angeles in 1978.



Still received many awards for his work: seven honorary degrees; commissions from CBS, New York World's Fair, League of Composers, Cleveland Orchestra and other important cultural organizations; the Phi Beta Sigma Award; a citation from ASCAP noting his "extraordinary contributions" to music and his "greatness, both as an artist and as a human being"; and the Freedom Foundation Award. Not only was his music performed by most of the major American orchestras, but he was also the first Black musician to conduct one of those ensembles (Los Angeles Philharmonic, at Hollywood Bowl in 1936) and a major symphony in a southern state (New Orleans Philharmonic in 1955). In 1945, Leopold Stokowski called William Grant Still "one of our great American composers. He has made a real contribution to music."

Poet, lyricist, journalist, essayist, social worker and Unitarian religious educator Joseph Mitchell Pilcher was born in Marksville, Louisiana in 1896 but spent most of his life in Alabama, where he was the state's Poet-Laureate, a member of the Alabama Writers' Conclave, chairman of Alabama National Poetry Day, and advocate for educational opportunities and library services for African Americans. In 1947, Still composed *Wood Notes* inspired by Pilcher's writings; the work was premiered by Artur Rodzinski and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on April 22, 1948. The suite's movement titles and performance indications summarize the music's referential and expressive intents: I. *Singing River* (Moderately slow); II. *Autumn Night* (Lightly); III. *Moon Dusk* (Slowly and expressively); and IV. *Whippoorwill's Shoes* (Humorously).

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# ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK: Symphony No. 7 in D Minor, Op. 70

## Notes on the Program

By Phillip Huscher

**T**o the late nineteenth century, Dvořák was the composer of five symphonies. His first four symphonies, never published during his lifetime, were unknown. This powerful D minor work was published in 1885 as Symphony no. 2, simply because it was the second symphony by Dvořák to come off the printer's press, even though it was the seventh to come from the composer's pen. Dvořák, who was perhaps the only one capable of setting the record straight, didn't, when, at the top of this manuscript, he wrote Symphony no. 6—discounting a first symphony that was never returned from an orchestral competition and thus presumed lost.

Like his nineteenth-century colleagues Schubert and Bruckner, Dvořák has been good to musicologists, who sometimes make a living straightening up after the fact. The music itself—what was known of it—has long been loved by the public. But only with the publication of Dvořák's first four symphonies in the 1950s (the long-lost First Symphony was rediscovered after the composer's death and performed for the first time in 1936) did we begin to use the current numbering. By now, even musicians who grew up knowing this symphony as no. 2 have come to accept it as no. 7.

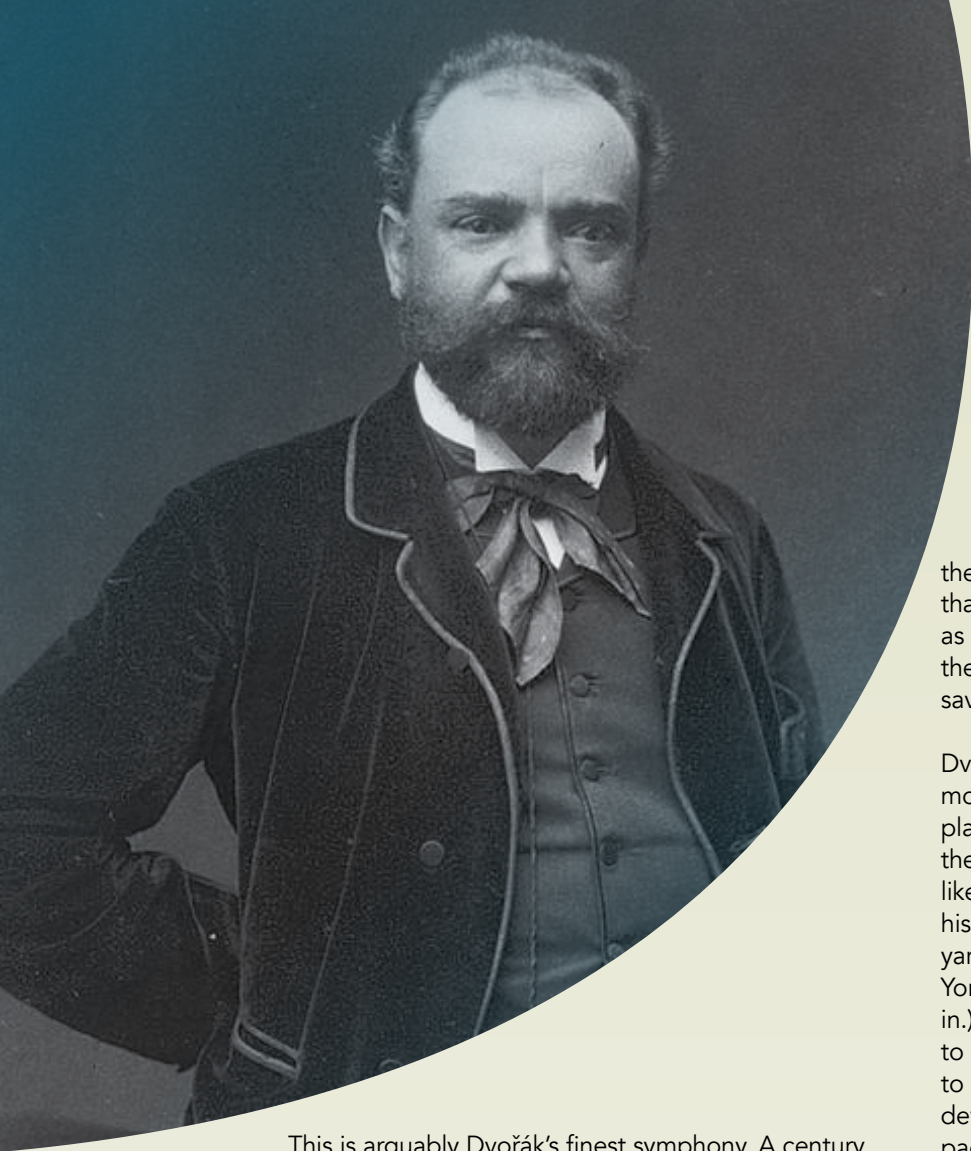
In the spring of 1884, Dvořák went to London at the invitation of the Royal Philharmonic Society,

whose members received him with enthusiasm and affection. After he returned home in June, the society elected him a member and commissioned a new symphony, but Dvořák waited six months before he began to work on it.

**In a sense, this symphony was born the day Dvořák first heard Brahms's new Third Symphony, and that was the music that still filled his head when he sat down that December to begin sketching.** Johannes Brahms had already played a decisive role in Dvořák's life, lending support and encouragement, and persuading his own publisher, Fritz Simrock, to take him on. Although Brahms insisted their admiration was reciprocal, history has tended to hear Brahms's voice in Dvořák's music, and not the other way around.

The work on the new symphony went quickly—three months from the first sketch to the finished product—but not smoothly. The sketches are a muddle; many pages are incomplete, as if Dvořák did not know how to continue. In February 1885, he wrote to Simrock, informing him of the new symphony and mentioning Brahms's name in the same breath: "I don't want to let Brahms down." By March 17 the work was done, and Brahms could not possibly have been disappointed with the result.





This is arguably Dvořák's finest symphony. A century ago, when the esteemed British writer and critic Donald Tovey ranked this D minor symphony with Schubert's great C major symphony and the four by Brahms, it was not because of Dvořák's indebtedness to either of those composers, but because he truly thought this work worthy of that exalted comparison. The D minor symphony not only represents a mastery of form comparable to that of Schubert or Brahms—and new to Dvořák—but it searches for a deeper meaning than audiences had come to expect from the composer of popular Slavonic dances.

Fritz Simrock greeted this new symphony—as most of Dvořák's music—with the transparent disappointment that it was not another set of Slavonic dances that he could quickly print and easily sell, making both him and Dvořák richer. Dvořák, who understood that music brings its own riches, was irritated that Simrock was unmoved by the symphony's great success at its London premiere under the composer's direction. And so, the two were set for a confrontation. That came soon enough when Simrock offered a mere three thousand marks for the symphony (which Dvořák considered an insult), and then insisted that

the printed score bear the German Anton rather than the Czech Antonín, which the composer took as a personal attack on his nationality. Ultimately, they compromised on Ant.—the neutral abbreviation saving not only space but a friendship as well.

Dvořák said that the main theme of the first movement came to him while he stood on the platform waiting for the train from Pest to arrive at the State Station, an unlikely inspiration made more likely by the knowledge that Dvořák spent hours of his adult life monitoring the progress of trains in rail yards wherever he lived. (When he moved to New York, he loved watching the Boston trains come in.) The second theme—in B-flat, and far too lovely to have been launched by a locomotive—leads to a magnificent and generous paragraph. The development of these materials is short and densely packed. The movement ends not with the tragic power, which it has so brilliantly harnessed, but in a sudden demise.

The second movement is remarkable not only for the quality of its material, but also for the way it unfolds, freely and unpredictably. This is very rich music, both intimate and openhearted; sweeping lyricism gives way to brief, emerging comments from the horn, the clarinet, or the oboe. The Largo of the later New World Symphony may always be more famous and more easily remembered, for it is a big and gorgeous tune, but Dvořák never surpassed the achievement of this movement.

Many scherzos are dance music, but this one nearly lifts an audience to its feet—and sometimes prompts a bit of podium activity as well—with its lively and infectious rhythm. There is also the added excitement of an accompaniment that suggests two beats to the bar and a melody that wants three. With the finale, tragedy reappears, rules a number of themes, dictates a particularly stormy episode midway through, and admits a turn to D major only at the very end.