



**AMERICAN GIFTS
FOR MARIMBA DUO**

Jack Van Geem & Nancy Zeltsman

Michael Tilson Thomas

Roger Sessions

Irving Fine

Joseph Brackett

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AMERICAN GIFTS

Jack Van Geem & Nancy Zeltsman, marimba duo

IRVING FINE

(1914-1962)

Music for Piano (1947) [14:53]

1) Prelude (1:12)

2) Waltz - Gavotte (3:34)

— Variations —

3) I. Andante (1:36) 4) II. Allegro (1:41)

5) III. Andante (2:11) 6) IV. Lento assai (1:28)

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7) Interlude - Finale (3:10)

Adapted for marimba duo by J. Van Geem & N. Zeltsman



ROGER SESSIONS

(1896-1985)

Sonata No. 1 for piano (1930) [18:09]

8) Andante (2:13) 9) Allegro (5:31)

10) Andante; Poco meno mosso; Tempo I (4:17)

11) Molto vivace (6:09)

Adapted for marimba duo by N. Zeltsman

JOSEPH BRACKETT

(1797-1882)

12) Simple Gifts ('Tis a Gift to Be Simple) (1848) (2:14)

Arranged by Penny Rodriguez (for piano)



MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

(b. 1944)

Island Music (2003) (30:50)

- 13) Introduction: Long Familiar Refrains (3:51)
- 14) Part One: Thoughts on the Dance Floor (6:11)
- 15) Part Two: In the Clearing (13:52)
- 16) Part Three: Ride Outs (6:57)

Jack Van Geem, solo marimba 1

Nancy Zeltsman, solo marimba 2

Raymond Froehlich, tutti marimba 1

James Lee Wyatt III, tutti marimba 2

David Herbert, percussion 1

Tom Hemphill, percussion 2

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The two artists perceive strong musical connections among the pieces on this CD: its “beautiful sense of shared language” according to Jack Van Geem. As the CD title *American Gifts* states, all of the works are composed by Americans and cover time and geography: one originated in mid-19th century Maine, two from East Coast composers Fine and Sessions in the mid-20th century, while West Coast composer Michael Tilson Thomas’s *Island Music* was written in the 21st century.

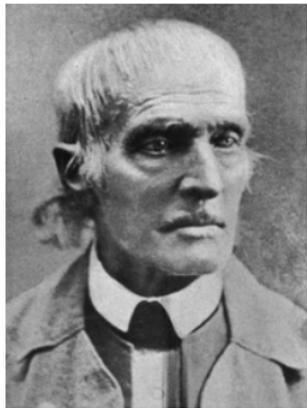
The Americanness that appears in the musical thread that winds among the works was perhaps best expressed by Aaron Copland’s use of Brackett’s Shaker hymn in his 1944 ballet, choreographed by Martha Graham, *Appalachian Spring*. This tune has been used hundreds of times since. Copland had studied with the Parisian pedagogue Nadia Boulanger as did Sessions and Fine. Boulanger promulgated Stravinsky’s music and was herself essentially French in musical taste. These Neo-Classical qualities were transmitted to her students and can be heard most distinctly in Irving Fine’s *Music for Piano*. Of course, the three composers could not help but bring their native American roots to their music.

Music for Piano is dedicated to **Irving Fine's** teacher Nadia Boulanger and shows influences of the Stravinsky *Sonata for Two Pianos* and Copland's *Appalachian Spring*: a reference to Copland's "'Tis a Gift to be Simple" can be heard in the first measures. A classic Boulanger type of piece, *Music for Piano* reflects French neo-classical charm in the use of color, as well as small, precious, and refined gestures, as opposed to the long lines of the Germans by whom Sessions was influenced. One definition of neo-classicism might be pouring new wine into old bottles, the old bottles being the classical genres of this work's eight movements.

Close friends during the 1920s, **Roger Sessions** and Aaron Copland put on a series of concerts in New York from 1928 through 1931 called the Copland-Sessions Concerts. Sessions was living in Europe as a Fellow at the American Academy in Rome during those years, and Copland asked him to write a piano sonata for the inaugural concert. Pursuing a pattern already begun and continuing to the middle of the century, Sessions was late in finishing the commission; only the first two movements were played by John Duke on the second Copland-Sessions concert in May 1928. The complete version was heard two years later at the American Academy in Rome, played by Frank Mannheimer. Copland wrote of the first piano sonata, "To know the

work well is to have the firm conviction that Sessions has presented us with a cornerstone upon which to base an American music.”

The structure of the sonata is three movements. The andante introduction is actually the beginning of the slow middle movement. This andante is interrupted by the fast movement, then continued. The first and third movements are in sonata-allegro form and in C minor; the opening and recurring slow sections in B minor. While some hear references to Beethoven, Chopin, or Liszt, the composer saw it as like a Bach aria.



“Simple Gifts,” a Shaker song composed in 1848, is attributed to Elder **Joseph Brackett** from the Alfred Shaker Village in Maine. The song was largely unknown outside of Shaker communities until Aaron Copland used the melody in his 1944 ballet *Appalachian Spring*. Since then, it has been widely adapted by other composers, including by John Williams for a performance at Barack Obama’s inauguration. The words of its single verse are:

'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free,
Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and Delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we will not be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Michael Tilson Thomas's *Island Music* is dedicated to “Lou Harrison and in memory of Bill Colvig and Ingolf Dahl” whose music Thomas continues to champion. Just before the performance of a preliminary duo version, February 2, 2003, the performers and Thomas learned of Lou Harrison's death that day. The premiere of the final version of *Island Music* was performed by Van Geem and Zeltsman on April 3, 2003, with the percussion section of the New World Symphony at Lincoln Theatre in Miami, Florida. Thomas's reference to Harrison is telling in that fellow Californian Harrison had absorbed multicultural influences from the East and wrote for percussion ensembles and for instruments that Colvig had found or built. Dahl, an immigrant to America in 1938, was influenced by Stravinsky and taught at the

University of Southern California where Thomas was his student: he considers Dahl one of his most important mentors.

The composer writes of *Island Music*: *Island Music* began on my first trip to Bali. Lying around our house in the village of Sian were wooden instruments belonging to the local gamelan. I couldn't resist the opportunity of improvising on them and soon evolved a bouncy little tune which became the main theme of *Island Music*. Everything in the piece comes from development of this tune.

The musical language of the piece “drifts” back and forth between the islands of Indonesia and the Caribbean, stopping along the way in the United States.

The piece is in the form of a rondo—a shape much favored by Schubert in his four-hand piano pieces. The form of a rondo is AB-ACADAE, etc. The A theme is the perky little vacation tune, and the BCD etc. music represents distracting or vexing thoughts of day-to-day or life problems that one is trying to get rid of while on vacation. Gradually, these distracting thoughts begin to affect the happy vacation tune, eventually completely changing and stopping it. Then

the decision is made to work back to the tune and recover its energy and optimism.

The introduction, “Long Familiar Refrains,” presents a meditative improvisation for the soloists on a melancholy reflection of the main tune, which bears a resemblance to the kind of half-heard melodies my father used to hum.

Part I, called “Thoughts on the Dance Floor,” introduces the main theme and its dialogues within the contrasting materials. The title of this section recalls my house in Bali (which was also a dance pavilion) and also the kind of wandering thoughts that I have always found are a part of the dance club experience.

Part II, “In the Clearing,” imagines a break in the dancing. The music gradually becomes more moody as it remembers, praises, and laments the spirits of those who are sadly no longer with us on the dance floor. The music becomes more and more lyrical until it dissolves into arabesques.

Part III, “Ride Outs,” encourages the soloists to lead the ensemble back to the original happy form of the tune with which it began.

There then follows a coda, very much indebted to both Beethoven and James Brown, which brings the piece to a jubilant conclusion.

The piece, originally conceived as a small solo, grew into its present shape with the encouragement of Nancy Zeltsman. Her beautiful marimba playing, especially in the low part of the instrument, was an inspiration. Also, Jack Van Geem's virtuosic stamina pushed me on toward creating this piece, which is definitely a *tour de force*. I hope that listeners will hear *Island Music* as a reflection of the music traditions of both East and West and as an opportunity to enjoy the flexible and musical Schubert-inspired situations that I have enjoyed creating for percussion ensemble.





Jack Van Geem has lovingly pushed against the limits of the marimba since age four. This prepared him for a 32-year career as Principal Percussionist and Assistant Timpanist with the San Francisco Symphony, as well as percussion teacher at San Francisco Conservatory of Music for 28 years and Colburn School for nine. It pushed him to write

five books on percussion and performance and promote/perform new marimba music. This love also prepared him for the amazing partnership with Nancy Zeltsman. In her he found a musician with the same passion for challenging the marimba's limits as well as his own! His gratitude is boundless . . .

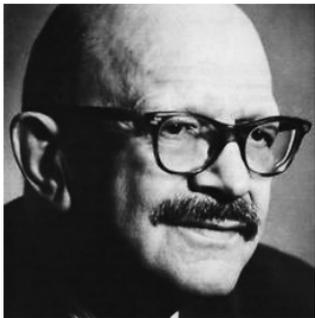


For 40 years, **Nancy Zeltsman's** contributions as a marimba performer and teacher have been a force in introducing people to the marimba. She has premiered 125 solo and chamber works; performed and taught across the U.S. and Europe and in China, Japan, and Mexico; and recorded numerous CDs. Zeltsman has taught at joint institu-

tions Boston Conservatory at Berklee and Berklee College of Music for 26 years and, since 2013, as regular guest professor at Conservatorium van Amsterdam. She founded the marimba/violin duo Marimolin and Zeltsman Marimba Festival. This release celebrates 20 years of her exhilarating bicoastal marimba partnership with Jack Van Geem!



In his short life—he died at age 47—**Irving Fine** made significant contributions as a composer, conductor, and teacher at Harvard University, Brandeis University, and Tanglewood. Because of his use of poly-chords, polytonality and modal ambiguity, Aaron Copland placed Fine as belonging in an American “Stravinsky School.” Certainly, he is a member of the so-called Boston School, along with Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Berger, Lukas Foss, and Harold Shapero. His monumental three-movement *Symphony* (1962), written in the last year of his life, combines his Stravinskian elements, his own lyricism, and his late adoption of twelve-tone techniques (not used in his *Music for Piano*).



Roger Sessions, who taught for fifty years at Princeton University, the University of California at Berkeley, and The Juilliard School, was known as an American exponent of modernism in music. He wrote two operas, nine symphonies, several concertos and other orchestral works, as well as large vocal works with orchestra. His three piano sonatas are considered staples of the modern repertoire for the instrument.

Influenced by both Stravinsky and Schoenberg (he was friends with both composers), Sessions absorbed elements of their styles and found his own voice using long-lined gestures, counterpoint, and elaborate orchestration.



Michael Tilson Thomas celebrated his final year as Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony in 2020, after 25 years in the role. Born in Los Angeles, MTT is also noted for his work as a pianist, composer and producer of multimedia projects that are dedicated to music education and the reimagination of the concert experience. He is Founder and

Artistic Director of the New World Symphony, has won eleven Grammys for his recordings, and is the recipient of the National Medal of Arts. The earliest performances of his works (when he was in his mid-40s) caused him “to take my writing seriously, to care about it, and to care about wanting to have people hear what was going on inside my head. . . . I now understand what Aaron [Copland] and Lenny [Bernstein] said about committing oneself to writing it down and to selecting more carefully what is really essential.”



Sessions, Fine, and Brackett were recorded May 30 and 31, 2018 in Richard Ortner Rehearsal Hall, Boston Conservatory at Berklee, Boston, MA.

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Recording Engineer: Joel Gordon

Editing and Mixing: Joel Gordon with Nancy Zeltsman

Executive Producers: Nancy Zeltsman and Jack Van Geem

Michael Tilson Thomas's *Island Music* was recorded live January 6-8, 2005 with the San Francisco Symphony percussion section at Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA—a venue of the San Francisco War Memorial and Performing Arts Center, City and County of San Francisco.

Visit the San Francisco Symphony at: sfsymphony.org

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