

# Rorem Birthday Concert Program Notes



Photo by Marc Geller

Ned Rorem was born in Richmond, Indiana on October 23, 1923, the son of Rufus Rorem, a medical economist whose work led to the creation of Blue Cross. As a child he and his family moved to Chicago where his piano teacher introduced him to Debussy and Ravel. According to Mr. Rorem, this was a life-changing event. He entered Northwestern University at 17 and two years later transferred to the Curtis Institute. He studied composition at Juilliard, and graduated with a B.A. in 1946 and a Master's degree in 1948. The following year he moved to France where he lived for the next 9 years. He published his diaries of that period as *The Paris Diary*, the first of many volumes he has written since then.

Rorem's style is, if nothing else, lyric. It is therefore not surprising to discover that he has written more than 600 songs. Based in a traditional tonal language, his particular

sonority comes from his use of synthetic scales (e.g., scales derived from a combination of chromatic and whole tone scales) and his frequent use of augmented 4ths and major 7ths in his melodies.

Rorem uses a great economy of means in his compositions. For example: the first movement of *Book of Hours* is composed in retrograde (backwards) from the middle of the movement; the opening flute solo of the *Trio* provides material that Rorem uses in the other movements. Mr. Rorem has always hesitated to describe his music. While the music is not programmatic as is, for example, Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, the following material is provided with the hope it will make the music more easily understood.

The Book of Hours was a common devotional form in the 1200-1300s. They were Christian prayer guides, often lavishly illustrated. The most famous of these is *Les Très Riches Heures Du Duc De Berry*, and there are several local examples in Wellesley College Library's Special Collections. Mr. Rorem has chosen to "illustrate" the various hours of the liturgical day in music. As the day progresses toward noon, the movements become increasingly active, and less so as the day turns to night. If you listen closely you will hear in the last movement that the flute plays the harp's line from the first movement, and the harp, the flute's.

*Romeo and Juliet* focuses on several moments in the play. The flute at times representing Juliet and the guitar, Romeo. The first movement, marked "large, free and glistening," represents Romeo's soliloquy after seeing Juliet. In the second movement, "Queen Mab hath been with you," the bewitchment in the music is enhanced in the irregular time signature of 5/8 and the flute and guitar playing in different keys. The third movement has an agitated Romeo repeatedly being soothed by Juliet's calm caresses. "O serpent heart," the guitar solo movement is an evocative piece, reminiscent of Dowland's Renaissance lute music. Movement V's "Sad hours seem long" has the instruments playing a slowly and meditatively. The flute solo movement recalls a nightingale's song. "Come weep with me" again has the instruments playing in different keys, with the mournful melody lines interrupted from time to time by hiccupping grace notes, much like desperate weeping. "Empty tigers" echoes Romeo's warning to his servant not to interrupt him in his last meeting with Juliet in her tomb:

The time and my intents are more savage-wild  
More fierce and more inexorable far  
Than empty tigers or the roaring sea.

The last movement is a slow funeral cortege alternating sections in 3/4 with a wailing motif with sections in a march-like 5/8.

The *Trio* opens with a sensuous flute solo, followed by a forceful tutti section that uses motifs from the opening solo. In second movement, the flute and cello intertwine and exchange melody lines in an inexorable crescendo from a very soft dynamic. The piano marks this crescendo with intermittent, violent chords. A dramatic cello solo opens the third movement followed by a tutti section that echoes melodic material from the beginning of the piece. The third movement is a rondo, with the opening material recurring throughout the movement, at times with variations, e.g. by octave displacement or longer note values. The last four notes of the movement are the first four in retrograde, with octave displacement.

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