

A stylized, low-poly illustration of a landscape. On the left, a large, dark red tree trunk stands against a light blue sky with white, swirling patterns. In the background, there are green and blue mountains. The middle ground features a yellow and orange landscape with rolling hills. In the foreground, a dark grey train engine with a red stripe and a white headlight is shown, moving towards the right. The overall style is modern and graphic.

Program Notes for Plains, Trains, & Violins

Plains, Trains & Violins

Program Notes for

Saturday, January 21, 2023 | 7:30 PM

Sunday, January 22, 2023 | 3 PM



by Dan Kepl

Season 2023 opens January 21st and 22nd with a program that speaks eloquently to the history of human migration on our planet, especially in the last two centuries. Conductor Nir Kabaretti has crafted a musical experience that speaks with bittersweet poignancy to the vast movement of peoples and cultures sparked worldwide by the Industrial Revolution (1750–1914) that continues to this day.

Rapid advances in public transportation - trains in particular - is the concert's narrative backstory and topic of the first piece, Peter Bernstein's orchestration for the Santa Barbara Symphony (Concert Version World Premiere) of his father Elmer Bernstein's charming score to the 1950s stop-action animated film, *Toccata for Toy Trains*. Violinist Guillermo Figueroa joins maestro Kabaretti to explore Miguel Del Águila's evocative Concerto for Violin, *El viaje de una vida* (*The Journey of a Lifetime*) with its own unique migration story to tell. Crowning the concert's subtle and inspiring messaging about discovery, one of the greatest musical insights into American multiculturalism ever penned by a visiting foreigner, is Dvořák's *New World Symphony*.

Long-time Santa Barbara resident before moving to nearby Ojai in his last years, American composer Elmer Bernstein (1922–2004) was one of the most highly regarded film composers of his era, composing scores for over 150 major movies including blockbusters like *The Ten Commandments*, *The Great Escape*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Magnificent Seven*. A graduate of New York University and The Juilliard School, Elmer Bernstein was blacklisted during the McCarthy era in the early 1950s. For a period of years during that bleak time in American history, the composer accepted lesser jobs to cover rent and groceries, composing music for cheesy monster movies, TV shows, and commercial documentaries.

The composer was nurtured artistically during those blacklist years by collaborations with Charles and Ray Eames, the world-famous mid-century husband and wife furniture and architecture design team. The Eames' produced around 125 short art films focused on various of their many passions, including antique toy trains. Bernstein was employed to write the music for several of their shorts, including a film about toy trains.

Toccata for Toy Trains (1957) which can be seen on [YouTube](#), is a stop-action animation fantasy of about 14 minutes shot from a toys-eye-view, with a whimsical opening narrative by Charles Eames himself, about the subtle artistic differences between antique toy trains and mere model trains. Most of the trains, automobiles, people, towns, and train stations in the film date to the late nineteenth century, the very heartbeat of the Industrial Revolution.

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Elmer Bernstein's son, Peter, a professional jazz guitarist and film composer in his own right, has expanded his father's original *Toccata for Toy Trains* score written for eight players to the full orchestral capabilities of the Santa Barbara Symphony. In doing so, this charming score will now enjoy the wider audience it deserves.

Fleeing Uruguay's repressive military government in 1978, Miguel del Águila immigrated to the United States and in time received his American citizenship. Graduating from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, he attended the prestigious Hochschule für Musik in Vienna, returning to the US in 1992 (Ojai, California). Águila has enjoyed three Latin Grammy nominations in recent years for his compositions and has served as composer in residence with orchestras in America and around the world.

Miguel del Águila's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 94 *El viaje de una vida – The Journey of a Lifetime*, was commissioned by the New Mexico Symphony in 2007 and premiered by that orchestra with its music director, violinist Guillermo Figueroa as soloist in 2008. Figueroa is guest artist for these Santa Barbara Symphony performances of the Violin Concerto – a real treat.

Águila assigns the violin soloist the role of traveler and protagonist in his musical narrative. Abandoning the homeland (Spain) for South America in the first movement, *Cruzando el océano hacia un nuevo mundo – Crossing the Ocean to a New World*, Águila describes the Atlantic crossing in music; a soundscape as vast and expectant as the sea itself. The second movement, *En la tierra púrpura – In the Purple Land*, is a somewhat withdrawn and somber narrative, suggesting the melancholy style of the *Vidalita*, a slow and nostalgic song of the Uruguayan gauchos; the music a sensual conversation between soloist and orchestra.

The brief third movement, *El regreso – The Return*, depicts an imagined return to Spain by the traveler years later to confront his past, which segues without pause into the fourth movement, *Jota-Finale*. Initially in a light mood, the concerto ends with a dramatic confrontation between soloist and orchestra (the traveler and the outside world) as the immigrant realizes that one can never return to the same place. What was left long ago, is lost forever.

Violinist/conductor Guillermo Figueroa is the Principal Conductor of the Santa Fe Symphony, Music Director of the Music in the Mountains Festival in Colorado, and the Lynn Philharmonia in Florida. He has served as Music Director of both the New Mexico Symphony and the Puerto Rico Symphony. At The Julliard School, his teachers were Oscar Shumsky and Felix Galimir. His conducting studies were with Harold Farberman in New York.

Bringing the program's immigration saga full circle, philosophically as well as musically, maestro Kabaretti has programmed Czech composer Antonín Dvořák's musical masterclass on the subject, the Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95 *From the New World*, composed in 1893 while the composer was in America (1892–1895) serving as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City (1888–1920).

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Invited by the National Conservatory's founder, Jeannette Meyers Thurber, a philanthropist who championed the rights of women, people of color, and the handicapped throughout her life, Dvořák experienced first-hand during his five-year stay, an America that was prosperous post-Civil War, and poised to become for better or worse, a great power on the world scene. The promise of the Statue of Liberty's pledge was still fresh. Immigration to America was at an all-time high in the 1890s.

Westward expansion thanks to the transcontinental railroad, was opening the interior of the country to vast new settlement lands. The United States, having won its "Indian Wars" with a final slaughter of Native Americans at Wounded Knee (1890) was on the cusp of its Imperialist moment; wealth in resources, commerce and human energy was clearly visible everywhere Dvořák travelled.

At Jeannette Thurber's suggestion, the composer titled his eye-witness musical snapshot of America, "From the New World," completing the Symphony No. 9 during his second year in-country (1893) literally completing the manuscript in the middle of nowhere, tiny Spillville, Iowa, whose population in 2020 was only 385, but which had a thriving, if also small Czech immigrant community in the 1890's. A stunning musical diary of what he saw and heard, but more importantly what he intuited from the vibrant and rambunctious new republic, Dvořák's is a narrative not so much about the immigrant journey to America, as the positive impact of immigration on the vibrancy of American democracy; a reverse musical postcard to the Old World, from the New.

Commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, the New World Symphony was premiered by the orchestra on December 16, 1893 and has been popular the world over ever since. In an interview with the New York Herald the day before the premiere, Dvořák minced no words. "I am satisfied that the future music of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro and Indian melodies. These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States. These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America, and your composers must turn to them."

In the standard late romantic symphonic form of four movements, the New World Symphony is entirely Dvořák's original music. "I have not actually used any of the [Native American] melodies," he said during another interview at the time. "I have simply written original themes embodying the peculiarities of the music, and using these themes as subjects, I have developed them with all the resources of modern rhythms, counterpoint, and orchestral color."

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The first movement, Adagio – allegro molto, especially its rousing horn tune, exemplifies the vigorous young nation of possibilities and energy the composer witnessed during his travels in America. The second movement, Largo, with its iconic English horn solo, is the key to understanding the deeply human subtext of the work. The composer decided on that instrument's color because it reminded him of the famously bittersweet baritone voice of his African American composition student at the National Conservatory, Harry Burleigh (1866-1949). Burleigh was instrumental in developing a characteristically American classical music genre. His ideas had a profound influence on Dvořák's thoughts about the importance of African American and Native American musical culture as the founding stone of the "New World" experience.

The third movement, Molto vivace, opens with a lively quadrille, which eventually melds into a charming original folk tune inspired, according to the composer, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, Hiawatha: To the sound of flutes and singing, To the sound of drums and voices, Rose the handsome Pau-Puk-Keewis, And began his mystic dances. The last movement, Allegro con fuoco, is a visionary musical anticipation of the American century ahead; a heroic toast to the success of the greatest immigrant experiment in human history – the United States.