

Bernstein and Copland: American Rhapsody

Concert Guide



Carlos Simon

“Wake Up!”

Concerto for Orchestra

First performance: 2023

Approximate duration: 20 minutes

[Listen](#)

[Carlos Simon](#) (born 1986) was raised in Atlanta, Georgia. Simon comes from a family of preachers. He learned to play piano in church when he was 10. His teacher at the time taught him music by ear, which Simon says helped him to hear and listen to music differently than other musicians. Today, his music has many gospel influences that he mixes with jazz and classical styles.

Simon’s “Wake Up!” Concerto for Orchestra premiered in 2023. A concerto usually features a solo instrument in front of the orchestra, but “Wake Up!” shows off the entire orchestra. The piece is inspired by the poem, [“Awake, Asleep”](#) by Indian Nepali-language poet Rajendra Bhandari. The poem does not speak of literal sleep but compares sleep to passivity. Bhandari describes a despot, or tyrant, that thrives when everyone else is asleep or passive.

Simon’s Concerto for Orchestra opens with a two-note motif that sounds as if the orchestra itself is saying, “Wake up!” Simon’s goal with this piece is not only to wake the audience with the sound of the orchestra, but also to leave those who hear it to question: Am I asleep?

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Aaron Copland **Clarinet Concerto**

First performance: 1950

Approximate duration: 18 minutes

[Listen](#)

Aaron Copland (1900–1990) was born in Brooklyn, New York. Copland is most celebrated for his music that depicts American culture and landscapes. He began learning piano at a young age with his sister as his first teacher. Copland started learning music composition as a teenager, later traveling to Paris to study further. His career took off when he was asked to write an organ concerto for his composition teacher to perform with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Copland began composing this piece after jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman asked him to write a clarinet concerto to perform. A concerto is a piece for a solo instrument and orchestra that shows off the abilities of the instrument and the soloist. Copland wrote the clarinet concerto to show off Goodman's skill as both a classical and jazz musician. The concerto is in two movements played back-to-back without pause. The first movement is slow and pensive, while the second movement moves more quickly. You'll know when the music transitions when you hear the soloist, [SLSO Principal Clarinet Scott Andrews](#), play a cadenza: an extended solo without accompaniment.

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Christopher Stark Violin Concerto “Vesper Flights”

First performance:

The world premiere of “Vesper Flights” takes place on April 9, 2027. You will be among the first to hear it!

[Christopher Stark](#) (born 1980) is a composer who grew up in the small town of Polson, Montana. He is currently based in St. Louis and teaches music composition at Washington University. Having spent his formative years in rural western Montana, almost all his music is inspired by nature.

“Vesper Flights” is an SLSO commission for the 2026/27 season. A commission is a request to a composer to write a piece of music for a certain purpose or with certain parameters. This commission stemmed from Stark’s friendship with [SLSO Associate Concertmaster, Erin Schreiber](#). Like Stark, Schreiber loves nature, and specifically birds. She asked Stark to write a piece about birds for her to perform. Originally Stark thought to write a piece for solo violin or a small chamber group. It eventually evolved into the large-scale violin concerto you will hear at this concert.

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Leonard Bernstein Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

First performance: 1961

Approximate duration: 22 minutes

[Listen](#)

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990) was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Bernstein's introduction to music was teaching himself to play piano at age 10 and earning enough money to pay for a few lessons on his own. He began taking piano lessons regularly when he started attending the Boston Latin School. Bernstein later went on to study music theory at Harvard University. Attending a concert at the Boston Symphony inspired Bernstein to further pursue music as a career.

Bernstein's career took off in September 1943, when he was appointed as the assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic. Merely two months later, he made his debut conducting the orchestra, stepping in when the conductor was ill. This performance was broadcast on TV nationwide and made Bernstein's name known across the world.

Around 1943, Bernstein began to compose and perform his own music. One of his most famous works is *West Side Story* which premiered in 1957. *West Side Story* is a musical based on the story of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Set in Manhattan's Upper West Side, the story follows main characters, Tony and Maria, who fall in love but are pulled apart from each other by a bitter rivalry. Bernstein's Symphonic Dances is an orchestral suite in nine movements featuring music from the musical. Most of the music comes from dance scenes in *West Side Story*, including the famous "Mambo" in the fourth movement. Movements two and seven feature the songs "Somewhere" and "Cool."

Bernstein and Copland: American Rhapsody will be performed on April 9, 2027, in Powell Hall at the Jack C. Taylor Music Center.

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Discussion Questions

1. Read the translation of Bhandari's "Awake, Asleep" linked below. Then listen to Carlos Simon's "Wake Up!" What musical elements does Simon use to convey sleep and wakefulness?
[Awake, Asleep](#)
2. Aaron Copland was celebrated for creating orchestral music that represented American culture and landscapes during his lifetime in the 1900s. What music do you think is representative of America today? Why?
3. Christopher Stark is a composer here in the St. Louis community. He wrote "Vesper Flights" for his friend, SLSO violinist Erin Schreiber. If you were friends with a composer and they wanted to write a piece for you, what would you want the piece to be about? What should it sound like and what instruments should be included? Would you want to perform it?
4. Read each of these synopses that correspond to one of the movements from Bernstein's Symphonic Dances to your students. Then ask them to predict what the music of that movement may sound like. What instruments will be most prominent? What tempo will the music be? What dynamic level? What style do you predict to hear?

Somewhere

A hopeful vision of love overcoming conflict. Imagine a place where Tony and Maria can be together in peace.

[4:38–8:35](#)

Mambo

A crowded, competitive dance where rival groups compete in the gym.

[10:01–12:33](#)

Rumble

A street fight between the Jets and the Sharks that leads to the deaths of two of their members.

[18:21–20:27](#)

5. Learn from the pros! Discuss how the experience of seeing and hearing the SLSO has informed your own music-making. What did you see or hear the SLSO musicians doing that you could strive toward, both individually and as an ensemble? What do you think it would take for you to perform with a professional music ensemble one day?
6. Following the concert, complete the following statements with your students: "I noticed...", "I enjoyed...", I wonder..."

[Explore other learning opportunities available through your SLSO.](#)