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Symphony Season Opens with Jones' Canyon Symphony, Born in the Subconscious

by Greg Waxberg

A Mississippi native is coming home, again. On September 17, to open the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra's first "Bravo" concert of the 2005-2006 season at Thalia Mara Hall, Music Director Crafton Beck will conduct Samuel Jones' Symphony No. 3, "Palo Duro Canyon", named for the canyon in Texas. This is the first time the Mississippi Symphony is playing a piece by Jones, although members of the orchestra have played his music in concerts arranged by Millsaps College. For the past five years, since Beck became music director, he has wanted to program one of Jones' works, and now the timing is right, especially because Jones celebrated his 70th birthday on June 2.

"When I heard this piece two years ago, I said 'this is the piece that's got to be done in Mississippi,' because it's one of his symphonies, first of all. It's so dramatic, it's eminently accessible and it presents its subject matter in such broad strokes that I knew that our audience would enjoy it", Beck says, during a conversation at the studios of Mississippi Public Broadcasting in late July. When asked for his general impression of the symphony, he responds with four words: "the panorama of it". He emphasizes the vibrancy, spaciousness, pictorial aspects and huge tableaus of open sounds. "It's the perfect thing for an American composer to do".

This also marks the first time that the Mississippi Symphony will play contemporary American music under Beck's baton. "The language is different", he explains. "The technical demands of an orchestra in the contemporary symphonic world are different from what was going on 100 years ago".

Jones, who was born in Inverness, is constantly writing new music. He lives in Seattle, where he is Composer-in-Residence of the Seattle Symphony. He has received numerous awards, including three Music Awards from the Mississippi Institute for Arts and Letters. He was the recipient of an Honorary Doctorate from Millsaps in 2000 and, in the same year, was inducted into the Mississippi Musicians Hall of Fame. And he certainly has been no stranger to his home state during the last few years.

In March of 2002, the Mississippi Boychoir and University of Southern Mississippi Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Jay Dean, presented the premiere of "Eudora's Fable: The Shoe Bird". For the 2003-2004 season, Jones enjoyed a residency with the Meridian Symphony Orchestra, when Claire Fox Hillard conducted three more of his compositions: "Roundings: Musings and Meditations on Texas New Deal Murals", the "Chorale-Overture for Organ and Orchestra", and the oratorio "*The Temptation of Jesus*".

This time, the focus is specifically on nature. The Palo Duro Canyon (Spanish for "hard wood") is approximately 20 miles south of Amarillo and the subject of a rather unusual commission that Jones received from the Amarillo Symphony. Usually, he explains, a commission coincides with a special occasion (as was the case with his Chorale-Overture), but the Amarillo Symphony wanted this piece to be about the canyon.

"They wanted it to commemorate, and to speak to, the special relationship that all the people in Amarillo - and the surrounding area of the panhandle of Texas - feel toward this really marvelous natural phenomenon", Jones says, speaking by phone from Seattle in mid-July. "My first reaction, of course, was

<http://www.agocal.org/essays.html/mso.html>

'wait a minute. There's already a piece written for a canyon.'" He's referring to Ferde Grofe's "Grand Canyon Suite", and the Palo Duro Canyon is called "The Grand Canyon of Texas".

"And what's really rather enduring about it, for me, [is that] Texans are noted the world over for bragging about having the largest of everything. This canyon is by no means the largest", he says, chuckling. "It's actually, as major canyons go, rather smallish".

The composer has noted in previous discussions of his Third Symphony that, in contrast to the pictorially-descriptive aspects of Grofe's piece, he aims more for capturing the feelings that the Palo Duro Canyon evokes, particularly the drama of seeing it for the first time. Jones comments that many people consider the surrounding area flat, but he doesn't quite see it that way. It's treeless, and the landscape creates the effect of being featureless.

"The landscape is very, very gently rolling. If you grew up in the Mississippi Delta, you know what flat is, as I did". The point of greatest impact, literally and figuratively, comes a little later. "You can hardly believe the earth opening up before you like that. I wanted to re-capture that feeling in the very beginning of my symphony".

Jones, by the way, was already in the spotlight when he witnessed all of this. A camera crew from a public television station in Amarillo tagged along to capture his impressions, part of a documentary about the evolution, rehearsal and performance of the symphony. "Not only was I doing what any normal tourist would do, seeing the canyon for the first time and being overwhelmed by *that*, I was, secondly, being overwhelmed by the knowledge that 'oh, my gosh, I have to write a piece of music about this.' And, thirdly, I was aware of the fact that there was a camera in the car and following me around".

Then, the situation became interesting. Jones struggled with how to convert his visual stimulation and awe to the medium of music. That evening, in his hotel room, he could not figure out how to portray the canyon's walls, because two sets of identical notes played on the same upward scale would not create the image of two separate walls. When he awoke the next morning, the theme was in his head. What had his subconscious realized? Tilt the image of the canyon from a "v" to a "<". This establishes a musical mirror, with one set of notes ascending for one wall, and the second set of notes descending for the second wall, allowing both sides of the canyon to be depicted simultaneously.

Jones says the same situation has happened with other projects. "When I wake up, my subconscious has dutifully done its work!"

Among other ideas, the symphony is intended to convey the vastness and beauty of the canyon, the canyon as a metaphor for earth, the struggle between the Native Americans and white settlers - utilizing two themes of the Comanche Indians, for whom the canyon was sacred - and the feeling of timelessness when man contemplates the stars. The first sound we hear is not music, but electronically-generated wind. Jones also invented a "bundle of sticks" to function as primitive-sounding percussion in the music depicting the Native Americans. The other percussion instruments include the snare drum, gong, xylophone, tambourine, cymbals, bass drum and bells. Except for the bells, which are heard later, almost all of this percussion is used together toward the beginning of the symphony.

"You get the feeling of scurrying, mammalian life," Jones says, referring to the sporadic notes in the strings that complement the wind. This is the "plains" theme and returns several times in the woodwinds and brass, particularly to establish that struggle between the Indians and white men. These sporadic notes become stronger, accompanied by the snare drum. "And then, all of a sudden," he continues, "the woodwinds and percussion come in with a mighty swoop and it opens up all the way down to the very depths of the orchestra." It is at this point that we are in the canyon and the subconsciously-born theme is played by the brass.

Of this theme, Beck says, "It's just magnificent, and it is magnificence."

The brass and timpani are emphasized throughout the symphony, and there are beautifully soaring moments for the strings, as Jones evokes the majesty of the canyon, with its grandeur and colors. During the final minutes, the xylophone and celesta symbolize feelings of floating, timelessness and meditation as the piece fades to silence.

With this being his first occasion to conduct music by a contemporary American composer with this audience, Beck says the most important outcome for him is that listeners will be open to hearing more music by Jones, and, overall, more music by a living American composer. "I hope that, by choosing this piece, and by the fact that Sam will be there, that the piece, on one hearing, will make a clear impression. When it's live, and with Sam there, there's going to be an intensity about the performance."

Speaking of intensity, as part of his preparation for this symphony, Jones traveled to the canyon at various times of the year. Following his first visit in late summer, he returned in December and walked to the amphitheater, where the premiere would take place in May of 1992. The canyon wall is behind this stage area, a splendid backdrop. Jones climbed the wall, maybe half or two-thirds the way, playing the canyon music to himself.

"I absolutely knew it was right. I was saying that as a kind of a test to see if that theme seems to resonate in the circumstances of the canyon itself, not just in my head in the hotel room. It seems to answer back, very affirmatively, 'yes, this is it.'"

Greg Waxberg is Music Director of Mississippi Public Broadcasting Radio. He writes program notes for the Mississippi Symphony Orchestra and Mississippi Opera, and his essay about Maestro James Levine was published on FanFaire.com.