

Home for the Holidays

Saturday, December 1st, 2018

Featuring Guest Vocalist Gabrielle Stravelli

Leroy Anderson's "Sleigh Ride" is a near-ubiquitous presence this time of year. And Anderson's holiday medley arrangements like "Christmas Festival" and "Suite of Carols" are yearly favorites on orchestra programs all over the world. However, we seem to rarely reflect on Anderson's life or career in the way that we might for another composer of his stature.

Anderson was born in Boston, MA to Swedish parents in the summer of 1908. His first music lessons came from his mother, an amateur church organist, but by the time Anderson reached high school, he was receiving lessons at the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music. Anderson eventually enrolled at Harvard where he studied musical composition, conducting, and double bass. However, following the completion of his Masters degree in music, Anderson decided that he would stay at Harvard but dramatically change his academic course by enrolling in a Ph.D. program in German and Scandinavian languages. Growing up the child of Swedish immigrants in Boston, Anderson already spoke both English and Swedish, but over the next several years he would develop fluency in a myriad of other European languages including Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, German, French, Italian, and Portuguese. While pursuing his Ph.D., Anderson also worked as organist and choir director for a local church and continued composing and arranging for a variety of local bands and orchestras. In fact, several of his arrangements and original compositions became so popular in the Boston area that in 1936, they were included as part of the Boston Pops season program at the personal behest of their conductor Arthur Fiedler.

Anderson's burgeoning career throughout the 1930s was interrupted, as so many others were, by the beginning of the Second World War and in 1942, he enlisted in the US Army. Because of his extensive language training, he was ultimately assigned to a desk of the US Counter Intelligence Corps based at Keflavik Air Base in Iceland. Following the war, he was he was reassigned to a role at the Pentagon as Chief of the Scandinavian Desk of Military Intelligence. But the responsibilities of his service did not prevent him from continuing to compose and arrange. In fact, his first number one hit on the Billboard chart, a song called "Blue Tango," was peaking at exactly the same time that Anderson was being recalled from his reservist status to serve in Korea.

Although "Sleigh Ride" was completed back in 1948 and first recorded by Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops the following year, it wasn't until Mitchell Parish added lyrics to the song in 1950 that it really began to work its way into the holiday canon. According to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), "Sleigh Ride" has consistently been the most

widely recorded and performed piece of Christmas music in their catalog and even ranks among the top-ten most frequently performed compositions of any genre composed by their members. Anderson biographer Steve Metcalf argues that “*Sleigh Ride*...has been performed and recorded by a wider array of musical artists than any other piece in the history of Western music.” In an unassuming way, this son of immigrants from Boston has made his indelible mark on American music.

Along with the ubiquitous “Sleigh Ride,” the FSO is proud to offer up plenty of other holiday favorites including some wonderful arrangements by jazz legends like Duke Ellington and Stan Kenton. And, of course, our entire program is given an extra dose of holiday spirit by our fabulous guest vocalist Gabrielle Stravelli. So sit back, relax, and enjoy. After all, it’s lovely weather for a concert together with you!