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Program Notes

Conga-Line in Hell
Miguel del Aguila

*Born in Montevideo, Uruguay, September 15, 1957*

With more than 115 works that couple drama and driving rhythm with nostalgic nods to his South American roots, three-time Grammy–nominated American composer Miguel del Aguila has established himself among the most distinctive and highly regarded composers of his generation. His music has been performed worldwide by over ninety-six orchestras, by thousands of ensembles and soloists, and recorded on thirty-four CDs. Recipient of two 2010 Latin Grammy nominations—for his CD *Salón Buenos Aires* and his work *Clocks*—he received a 2015 Grammy nomination for *Concierto en Tango*, which only two years later has been scheduled for twenty-seven performances.

After graduating from the San Francisco Conservatory, Aguila studied at the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna. In 1989 he introduced his music at New York’s Carnegie Recital Hall, Lukas Foss premiered his *Hexen* with Brooklyn Philharmonic, and his first CDs were released. After ten years in Vienna he returned to the U.S. in 1992, becoming a notable figure in the Los Angeles music scene and receiving the 1995 Kennedy Center Friedheim Award.

With his works being performed at Lincoln Center, London’s Royal Opera House, and in most European capitals, Aguila was appointed resident composer at the Chautauqua Festival (2001–04). Through a New Music USA/Music Alive Award he became composer-in-residence with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra (2005–07). His residency culminated in the premiere of his third opera, *Time and Again Barelas*. Aguila received a New Music USA/Magnum Opus Award in 2008, the Lancaster Symphony Composer of the Year Award in 2009, and Copland Foundation awards, among others.

Aguila has fashioned many different versions of his *Conga-Line in Hell*. The first, for piano solo, called simply *Conga*, was composed in 1993 and premiered in 1994 by Eileen Huang in Winterthur, Switzerland. The second, also from 1993, for flute, two clarinets, percussion, piano, and eight cellos, was premiered that year by the Lo Cal Composers Ensemble at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Aguila made the present version, *Conga-Line in Hell*, for single winds, brass, and strings plus harp and percussion in 1994, and he himself played the piano part in the premiere by the Juilliard Ensemble that year in New York. He then expanded the wind, brass, and percussion parts for a version first performed in October 1994 by the Ventura Symphony Orchestra (now New West Symphony). Most recently David Appleton arranged a six-piano version of the work with the composer’s permission for performance at London’s Royal Opera House in 2000.

The composer writes: “*Conga* began as a dream. At first there was the visual image of an endless line of dead people dancing through the fire of hell. I gradually started hearing the
music, which was flowing spontaneously out of me in an effort to entertain and alleviate the pain of those poor souls. I woke up and wrote the music as I remembered it. As the name implies the work has a definite Caribbean flavor. The rhythmic pattern of the conga dance beats throughout the piece and is at times distorted into a 13/16 pattern.

“It employs unusual percussion and rhythmic structures, and instruments are often playing at their most extreme registers. The piano is used ‘obbligato’ as a sort of metronome, very much like the harpsichord of the old Baroque times. The music is humorous, sarcastic, grotesque, sensuous, and at times also terrifying. I rely mainly on the dramatic and expressive qualities of rhythm to convey the evil forces that govern my imaginary hell. As thematic material I primarily use rhythmic claves (Spanish for clef or key) as they are used in Latin American music: a sort of ‘rhythmic tonality’ to which harmony and melody must conform. After the sensuous middle section the work rushes frantically toward the end to explode in a dramatic finale.”

Aguila’s music is often pigeonholed as Minimalist, as in Bernard Holland’s positive review from the New York Times, which described Conga-Line in Hell as “Mr. Aguila’s delicious send-up of Minimalism.” He continued, “Here, sequences in stepwise motion careen out of control, a comic device Haydn also used to wonderful effect,” which does acknowledge other forces at work. Aguila himself objects to the label, saying that “the rhythmic pulse is a minimalist thing, because you are repeating it. In that sense, all folk music is minimalist.” Even as Aguila captivates with repetitive dance rhythms, he also delights the ear with imaginative percussion colors, wry humor, a huge central mood shift, mounting intensity, and an amazing timpani solo toward the end—all of which have won Conga-Line in Hell thousands of admirers.

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Scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, tuba, timpani, triangle, conga drums, maracas, glockenspiel, police whistles, suspended cymbal, small tam-tam, tubular bells (chimes), jazz bell (optional), harp, piano, and strings

Piano Concerto No. 21 in C major, K. 467
Wolfgang Amadè Mozart
Born in Salzburg, January 27, 1756; died in Vienna, December 5, 1791

Mozart seems to have worked frequently on two compositions in the same genre simultaneously, often resulting in pieces of contrasting character. Famous examples are the G minor and C major string quintets or his last two symphonies, again G minor and C major. Since the Piano Concerto in C, K. 467, was completed just four weeks after the D minor Concerto, K. 466, one suspects that Mozart had been writing them concurrently, especially as the accompaniments share identical orchestration: one flute, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. The similarities, however, end there. The C major Concerto flows with majestic ease, showing little of the D minor Concerto’s stormy pathos, and the first movement of the D minor unfolds in a tightly packed dramatic scheme, while the C major presents its material in an elegant, leisurely fashion. Writers have alluded to Mozart’s sunny and dark sides, and he no doubt found it satisfying to work simultaneously on such contrasting pairs.
To describe the C major Concerto as an entirely cloudless landscape would of course be a misrepresentation; nevertheless, a cheerful blend of wit and elegance predominates. The Concerto was first performed by Mozart himself at the Burgtheater in Vienna, March 10, 1785, the score having been completed only a day before.

The autograph score shows no tempo marking for the first movement, but subsequent editions label the movement “Allegro maestoso.” A distinctive marchlike motive opens this movement, and we are subsequently treated to a variety of themes showing Mozart’s rich capacity for melodic invention. After a full introductory discourse by the orchestra, the soloist enters modestly. The remainder of the movement follows the traditional concerto sonata form, with an interesting reordering of the main themes and motives in the recapitulation. Earlier, in the development, one might catch a preview of the Symphony No. 40 in a brief G minor episode of the solo piano. Throughout the movement the soloist and orchestra converse with natural ease.

The slow movement achieves a quality not often found in the concertos: that of a dreamy fantasia. The lyrical opening theme soon passes over beautifully dissonant harmonies that continue to delight our modern ears. This material was perceived to be quite daring initially, perhaps prompting Mozart’s father Leopold to write:

> Indeed the new Concerto is astonishingly difficult. But I very much doubt whether there are any mistakes, as the copyist has checked it. Several passages simply do not harmonize unless one hears all the instruments playing together.

Mozart loosely bases this Andante on a binary scheme, but the journey through many different keys and episodes gives the movement its fantasia-like atmosphere, enhanced by the colors of the muted strings. The movement has become enormously popular on its own—the 1967 Swedish film *Elvira Madigan* introduced it to a generation of listeners. Unlike the film, which has faded from public consciousness, Mozart’s beautiful music continues to shine.

The finale is a rondo, the theme of which is introduced at once in the orchestra. The piano soon enters, and provides episodes of different character—temporary introspection or virtuosic display—in between the bubbly recurrences of the theme. All but too short in comparison with the majesty of the first movement, the finale drives merrily to its conclusion.

—© Jane Vial Jaffe

*Scored for flute, 2 oboes, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings*

**Symphony No. 4 in B-flat major, op. 60**
Ludwig van Beethoven
*Born in Bonn, baptized December 17, 1770; died in Vienna, March 26, 1827*

The Fourth Symphony was only one in a steady stream of wonders that flowed from Beethoven’s pen in 1806 and 1807, including the three ground-breaking Razumovsky String Quartets, the Violin Concerto, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the *Coriolan* Overture, and parts of the Fifth Symphony. The Fourth Symphony was composed mostly in September and October of
1806 while Beethoven was a guest at Prince Lichnowsky’s summer castle near Troppau, Silesia. Though the visit was extremely productive, it also caused a temporary rupture in Beethoven’s friendship with the prince: having been jestingly threatened with house arrest after refusing to play one evening, Beethoven stormed out of the castle. He made his way on foot in the pouring rain to Lichnowsky’s physician’s house where he spent the night and dashed off the following celebrated note: “Prince! What you are, you are by accident of birth. What I am, I am through myself. There have been and will be thousands of princes. There is only one Beethoven.”

The Fourth Symphony was dedicated to another of Lichnowsky’s guests that summer, Count Franz von Oppersdorf, who was said to have hired servants only if they could play an instrument in his orchestra. The work may have been performed privately by the Count’s orchestra, but the first documented performance occurred in March 1807 at the Vienna residence of another of Beethoven’s patrons, Prince Lobkowitz. The newly composed Coriolan Overture and Fourth Piano Concerto received their premieres on the same concert.

Beethoven’s even-numbered symphonies, with the exception of the Pastoral, have been overshadowed by the “more dramatic” odd-numbered symphonies, but each of them contains its share of innovation and drama. The introduction to the first movement of the Fourth Symphony is unique in the repertoire for its searching quality and suspension of motion. The pianissimo dynamic and the unstable harmonies that move at an incredibly slow rate set the stage for one of the most exuberant fast movements that Beethoven ever composed.

The buoyancy of the Allegro is maintained by a wealth of contrasts: sudden fortissimo outbursts next to quiet bubbly motion, fast harmonic motion next to passages of slowly changing harmony, and juxtapositions of differing phrase lengths. Another supreme dramatic stroke is played out in the hush followed by a crescendo leading to the recapitulation, of which Berlioz wrote: “This astonishing crescendo is one of the most skillfully contrived things we know of in music. . . . You might compare it to a river whose calm waters suddenly disappear and only leave the subterranean bed to plunge with a roar in a foaming waterfall.”

Beethoven’s slow movement exhibits a unique form best described as sonata form with an unusually placed development section. The lovely main theme, featuring a decorated descending scale, returns after the exposition in ornamented fashion, lulling us into expecting the traditional slow-movement sonata form, that is, exposition and recapitulation with no real development. But then Beethoven’s development finally storms in, interrupting the recapitulation and heightening the drama. This miraculous section, one of Beethoven’s most imaginative, together with the first-movement introduction, provides the only somber contrast in the otherwise sunny Symphony. Beethoven ingeniously employs the introductory, quietly pulsing rhythmic figure throughout the movement, eventually entrusting it pianissimo to the timpani.

Up to this time Beethoven had employed the scheme scherzo-trio-scherzo, in keeping with the traditional form of the scherzo’s predecessor, the minuet. In the present third movement—for the first time in any symphony—he repeated the trio followed by another return of the scherzo,
resulting in the form A-B-A-B-A. In this way a scherzo, moving at a faster rate than a minuet, would not result in a movement that was too short in proportion to the others. Beethoven’s rhythmic play with groupings of two beats within triple meter delight the ears as do the violins’ impish answers to the winds and horns in the trio sections. The movement merrily concludes with a cleverly shortened last return of the scherzo.

The finale opens with a whirlwind of sixteenth notes in perpetual-motion style. Comic effects abound in this high-spirited movement, such as the drawing out of this theme by means of longer note values and pauses, and a particularly effervescent return of the theme in the solo bassoon.

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*Scored for flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, and strings*