**Ferde Grofé (1892-1972)**

**Composer, Arranger, Pianist, Father**

Born in New York City, the son and grandson of German immigrants, Ferde Grofé was raised by his mother and grandparents in Los Angeles. He was born into a musical family and as a youngster Ferde’s uncle and mother gave him lessons on viola and cello.  At the age of 13 Ferde left home to discover the world.  To earn a living he drove a team of horses, worked in a bookbindery, ushered in a theatre, dove and fished tourist-tossed coins thrown into the waters of Avalon, Catalina. Ferde continued his passion for music and paid for piano lessons and orchestration techniques from his own meager earnings in order to gain the knowledge of skilled European musicians and tutors who had immigrated to Los Angeles during the early 1900s.

Ferde moved and wandered to wherever he found a gig.  Traveling around the state he landed in San Francisco performing in the Barbary Coast on an off-key, tinny upright piano playing the early, popular rags of the day. At age twenty-four Ferde worked the Merchants Café in the border town of Douglas Arizona. During that period Ferde headed north to the Grand Canyon. He camped at the edge of the Canyon, built a fire, and his extraordinary dreams that night by the Canyon’s edge left him certain he would never, ever, forget the Grand Canyon.  And neither would any of us, as this was the initial inspiration for the *Grand Canyon Suite* -Ferde’s best-known musical composition.

Eventually San Francisco beckoned the curious young pianist home and Ferde moved back to California. Sherman Clay, San Francisco’s leading sheet music, piano, and instrument retailer offered to publish his first composition, an Elks Club BPOE Convention March for their gathering being held in the ‘city by the bay’.  Ferde was well known as ‘that local arranger’ who knocked out arrangements for local jazz band groups. At that time jazz music was extemporaneous which made it unavailable to musicians who could not improvise, as the music was spontaneously played and not written.   Ferde’s experience performing jazz and his ability to orchestrate what he heard helped him to create a unique niche as an arranger.   It also preserved an important part of America’s unique musical heritage.

In 1919, east coast musicians Paul Whiteman and Henry Busse, were in San Francisco searching for the 27 year old piano player who had discovered the secret of orchestrating jazz and printing the music on a page so it could be played again and again by the big bands of the day. Ferde’s arrangements published by Sherman Clay had found their way to the eastern big cities, and Whiteman wanted Ferde’s keen ear and talent for his orchestra. The Paul Whiteman Orchestra was the dominant, most highly acclaimed, and highly paid musical group of the roaring 20s.  Ferde Grofé, educated by his own means and determination was also, the most highly paid orchestrator of that period in American musical history. In 1924 Ferde Grofé orchestrated George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*.  To this date, the most popular and performed arrangement of Gershwin’s most famous piece is the arrangement crafted by Ferde Grofé.  At that time a musical arranger worked very closely, usually on a daily basis, with the composer.   Orchestrations were written by hand, which would have been a strenuous process for a large work such as the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Without Ferde’s expertise and dedication this masterpiece of American music would not exist as we know it.

During his long and productive musical life Ferde Grofé taught at the Julliard School and performed on radio programs including his own, “The Ferde Grofé Show”.  A prolific composer Ferde composed scores for movies as well as numerous suites of music about different sites and happenings in America such as *Grand Canyon Suite*and*Mississippi Suite.*There were many other suites as well including those from which we perform excerpts today*: Death Valley Suite; Hollywood Suite; San Francisco Suite; Wheels Suite*.

But it was in his later years that Ferde Grofé composed some of his most poignant works.  In 1962 and living in California again, Ferde Grofésuffered a stroke. His right side was paralyzed - and being right-handed Ferde was unable to write music.  In 1968 his concerned son, Ferde GroféJr. encouraged him to write again using his left hand.  Ferde responded that he was not inspired and refused to write until an upcoming American Band Masters Convention in Miami provided inspiration.  The request was for a musical work honoring the American Soldier.  A prolific screen writer, Ferde Grofé, Jr. wrote a poem; *'Ode to An American Soldier* which was the basis of his father’s musical composition for the Convention. After this Grofé’s spirits improved considerably.  He received a letter from Father Meinecke of St. Mary of The Mountains Catholic Church in Virginia City suggesting a composition depicting the spirit of the old mining towns.  Ferde Grofé, Jr. wrote the poem *Requiem for a Ghost Town*and presented it to his father.  Inspired again by his son’s words Ferde composed *Requiem for a Ghost Town*for orchestra.  It was performed, by an orchestra, in the streets of Virginia City, Nevada.   In 1970 father and son collaborated on their final project.   This piece, for the Sierra Club of California, was dedicated to the great California Redwoods of Sequoia National Park.  Fittingly, his son’s poem *Sequoia,* is more of a prayer, and was the inspiration for Ferde Grofé’s final musical composition.

Ferde Grofé passed away shortly after his 80th birthday in 1972.  He left us a rich legacy of incomparable American music in his own original works.  Just as important Ferde pioneered the method of orchestrating and writing down America’s unique genre of music - jazz.  In doing so Ferde insured the continued evolution of jazz music and made it available to the world.

We are honored to open our concert today with our performance of *Sequoia*.  We are grateful to Ferde Grofé, Jr. who will recite his prayer in honor of his father’s memory.

We are also grateful to Ferde Grofé, Jr. who provided many of the details regarding his father’s life and career for this brief biography