

ASO Program Notes

Signs of Life II

Russell Peck (1945 - 2009)

Russell Peck was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1945 and trained at the University of Michigan. After getting his Bachelor's degree in 1966 he went on to earn Masters and Doctoral degrees in composition. Known for his works for winds and percussion as well as strings, his compositions for orchestra have been performed thousands of times by hundreds of orchestras all over the world. In later life he narrated his own orchestral works for both adult and young audiences, and often appeared as a guest artist until his death in North Carolina in 2009.

In his autobiography, Mr. Peck tells us that, despite a very promising early start in orchestral composition, performing and teaching, in 1983 he faced a personal crisis. In 1978 he had dropped out of music altogether, gone to work at the United Nations and made ending global starvation his focus. During those five years his financial situation became desperate.

"...the only hope seemed to be to revive my composing career for orchestra immediately. I called a conductor who earlier showed interest in my work...and said I'd write him a string orchestra piece for free - actually it was based on my two-movement sax quartet *Drastic Measures* - if he'd premiere it with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra on a classical concert. He said okay. That was *Signs of Life*, which revived my orchestral career."

Signs of Life premiered in Milwaukee to mixed reviews. One critic called it "elevator music". In spite of these reviews, however, it was soon being performed widely in the US, then in Europe and Africa. In 1995 Peck added a short opening Allegro first movement which had first appeared as an independent work called *Don't Tread On Me*, a string quartet performed at a music festival in New Hampshire that same year. The complete three movement work, *Signs of Life II*, was premiered by the Boston Symphony in 1996.

The work now consists of the 3 1/2 minute opening Allegro, a lush Arioso and a jazzy Scherzo, and includes some fairly exotic string sounds. One of these new sounds, dubbed "peckzzicato" appears in the Scherzo movement. The composer tells us "it involves tapping out notes audibly on the fingerboard, as players often do as a way to practice the fingering of a passage in a very quiet way. Because it sounds a bit like pizzicato, I jokingly call the technique "peckzzicato." Mr. Peck, a product of the Detroit music scene in the 60's, credited "Motown and Mozart" as his primary musical inspirations.

Beryl McHenry