



# *A Musical Mother's Day: River Journeys*

Featuring  
Amy Likar, piccolo

## **Program**

The Mississippi River (1934)

Florence Price (1887–1953)

## **INTERMISSION**

Concerto for Piccolo and Orchestra (2015)

Martin Rokeach (1953– )

I. Proclamations, Whispers, Rumors

II. Still We Hope

III. Joy

*Amy Likar, piccolo*

“The Moldau” from *My Homeland* (1874)

Bedřich Smetana (1824–1884)

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**May 8, 2025, 7:30 p.m. • Rossmoor Event Center**

**May 11, 2025, 2:00 p.m. • Leshner Center for the Arts**

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## BIOGRAPHIES



In addition to being music director and conductor of the Diablo Symphony Orchestra, **Matilda Hofman** is conductor-in-residence of the Empyrean Ensemble at UC Davis and artistic director of the San Francisco-based Left Coast Chamber Ensemble. She also serves as a cover conductor for the San Francisco Symphony. California guest engagements include Festival Opera, the Fremont Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Ballet, the Sacramento Ballet, Stanford University, Sierra Summer Festival, and at Sacramento Opera as assistant to Michael Morgan. Committed to education, she initiated an outreach program with the DSO that includes family concerts and ensemble performances in schools. With Left Coast, she successfully implemented Pathways, a new program that gives opportunities to underrepresented emerging composers. In Europe she has performed at the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, as well as at the Salzburg Festival, Paris Autumn Festival, Berliner Festspiele, Holland Festival, and Luzerne Festival and has conducted alongside Ingo Metzmacher in performances of Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*. In 2018 she was on the faculty for the soundSCAPE new music festival in Italy. She has worked with Ensemble Modern, SWR Symphonieorchester, Ensemble Recherche, Bochumer Symphoniker, and Kammerakademie Potsdam. She has served as a conducting fellow at the Aspen Music Festival and School and has received awards from the League of American Orchestras and the Conductors Guild of America. In the 2024–25 season, Hofman will be conductor-in-residence at the University of the Pacific and a guest conductor at the Eastman School of Music, where she will also lead rehearsals and work with graduate conducting students. She was guest conductor for the Oberlin Opera Theater's November 2021 production of George Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, featuring Oberlin Conservatory students in the Vocal Studies Division and the Oberlin Orchestra. She holds degrees from Cambridge University, the Royal Academy of Music, and the Eastman School of Music.



Noted for her "dazzling...and winning tonal beauty and eloquence" (Joshua Kosman, *San Francisco Chronicle*), **Amy Likar** is an active freelancer and chamber musician based in the San Francisco Bay Area and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Expanding on her work as a flutist, Likar became fascinated with performance health and wellness through her own recovery from stress-related injuries. In all of her work, she is dedicated to helping musicians find the freedom to be fully themselves. Highlights of her performance career include the critically acclaimed premiere of Martin Rokeach's *Concerto for Piccolo and Orchestra*, in addition to the premieres of solo and chamber works by Valerie Coleman, Michael Stephens, Donald Sloan, and Daniel Felsenfeld. Dedicated to helping other musicians reach their full potential, Likar has mentored and credentialed more than 75 professionals as the director of training for the Association for Body Mapping Education. These educators teach in their own private studios and in institutions such as the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Amsterdam Conservatoire, Columbus State University, and Oberlin Conservatory. Likar serves on the faculty at Saint Mary's College of California as instructor of flute and is a member of the Oakland Symphony. As a guest artist, she regularly offers performance residencies and workshops that focus on getting to the essence of music-making.



The music of **Martin Rokeach** has been performed by the Oakland Symphony; Pacific/Mozart Ensemble; San Francisco Concerto Orchestra; Chameleon Arts Ensemble (Boston); the United States Army Orchestra; Dunsmuir Piano Quartet (San Francisco); League of Composers (NY); Divisa Ensemble (San Francisco); Musica Nova (Macedonia); the St. Petersburg (Russia) Chamber Players; and many other outstanding ensembles and soloists throughout the US, Europe, and Australia. Here are some of the comments his works have elicited: "fascinating...cleanses the listener's musical palate...positively aglow with contented reflection" (*Fanfare Magazine*); "surprising and utterly delicious" (*San Antonio Express News*); "Rokeach has a rare talent for knowing exactly how long his music should be...not one second longer, nor shorter, than necessary" (*21st Century Music*). His works have earned honors in more than 15 national or international composition competitions, and he has been commissioned to write music for the Ellsworth Smith International Trumpet Competition, New York's Cygnus Ensemble, Switzerland's Dobrzewski/Marrs Duo, Left Coast Chamber Ensemble, Music Teachers' Association of California, New York's Eight Strings and a Whistle, The Bowers/Fader Duo (NY), and numerous soloists. He has been a featured composer and speaker at the Ecole Haute de Musique in Switzerland, Hartt Conservatory of Music, New York University, and Wichita State University, and concerts devoted exclusively to his music have been held at Western Carolina University and Washington State University. Rokeach earned his Ph.D. in music composition and theory from Michigan State University and bachelor's and master's degrees from San Francisco State University. A professor emeritus at Saint Mary's College of California, he was artistic codirector of San Francisco's contemporary music concert series Composers, Inc., for 33 years. His oratorio, *Bodies on the Line: The Great Flint Sit-Down Strike*, was commissioned and premiered by the Oakland Symphony in 2023 and in 2026 will be performed again by the Mendelssohn Chorus of Philadelphia.

## PROGRAM NOTES: *A Musical Mother's Day: River Journeys*

Our Mother's Day concert opens with "**The Mississippi River**," a magisterial work by **Florence Price**. Daughter of a music teacher and a dentist, she excelled early at the keyboard and published her first composition at age 11. With the support of her mixed-race family in Little Rock, she studied with George Whitefield Chadwick at the New England Conservatory (where she initially passed for Mexican) but quickly came to embrace African American music as her birthright. Like other Black composers of her generation, Price relied on a support network of Black churches, newspapers, and educational institutions. She, in turn, became a pillar of support and a role model for a younger generation, particularly for composer and pianist Margaret Bonds, with whom Price and her two daughters lived in Chicago after she divorced an abusive husband in 1931.

Although we often speak of the Harlem Renaissance as a hotbed of African American artistic and political achievement, Chicago rivaled New York in its embrace of Black talent, particularly in the later 1920s and 1930s. After racial violence, including lynching, erupted in Little Rock, Price and her family joined the great northward migration. She lived in Chicago from 1927 until her death (in 1953), supporting herself as a composer, arranger, and organist and becoming acquainted—through Bonds—with poet Langston Hughes, dancer Katherine Dunham, and soprano Marian Anderson, among others. Price's vocal music frequently features texts by Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson, and her instrumental music is studded with spirituals, the Black hymns of faith and deliverance that W. E. B. DuBois famously called "sorrow songs," for their roots in the bitter experiences of slavery.

Price wrote "**The Mississippi River**" at the height of her short-lived fame: two years after her Symphony in E Minor received its premiere with the Chicago Symphony under Frederick Stock—the first symphony by a Black woman to be performed by a major American orchestra. On the heels of this success, she embraced even more overtly the sounds and symbols of African American culture, finding in the Mississippi River a metaphor for migration along a north-south axis. Following the course of the mighty stream, the tone poem begins at the headwaters with, in the words of Boston-based composer and violinist Jonathan Blumhofer, "an evocation of dawn along the Mississippi's banks. Lonely melodies; rich, noble chorales; imitations of bird song and nature alternate in a stately procession."

After a brief allusion to the Native American inhabitants of the Upper Midwest, the river's religious connotations come to the fore, as Price introduces African American spirituals invoking the deeply rooted symbolism of the river as a baptismal site and as an ever-shifting boundary between one life and the next. Interwoven with the famous tune "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" (which brings a cascading storm of whitewater in its wake) are three other spirituals ("Stand Still, Jordan," "Deep River" "Go Down, Moses") and the Tin Pan Alley song "Steamboat Bill," which narrates a headlong river race. (Walt Disney used this tune for the pioneering animated short film *Steamboat Willie*.) Price lavishes her skills as an orchestrator on these and her own melodies to create a soundscape both pristinely natural and saturated with the living history of Black America. Writing about "**The Mississippi River**," dancer and cultural critic Harmony Holiday notes that the river "is haunted and empowered by Black vitality, by signs that there was life beyond Delta and plantation land that could be reached, and if it could be reached it could be imagined. Langston Hughes wrote, 'I've known rivers... my soul has grown deep like the rivers' because those paths to a less horrific elsewhere... became a part of our fantasy and a route to what we dreamed freedom might be."

In 1943 Price wrote to Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor Serge Koussevitzky, "Unfortunately the work of a woman composer is preconceived by many to be light, frothy, lacking in depth, logic and virility... Add to that the incident of race—I have colored blood in my veins—and you will understand some of the difficulties that confront one in such a position." Price's position, however, has changed, particularly with the rediscovery in 2009 of dozens of her major works, crumbling in a dilapidated Illinois home where Price had vacationed. The near loss of this precious musical legacy, and the grandeur of "**The Mississippi River**," remind us to open our ears to the swiftly passing currents of history.

It's not every day that you hear a piccolo concerto! This smaller, higher sibling of the flute is often called into action for pictorial effects (birdsong, lightning, ghostly shrieks) or for its ability to slice through the orchestra like a knife. Place the piccolo in front of the orchestra, however, and an entirely different instrumental personality can emerge, full of subtlety and nuance. In 2016 **Martin Rokeach**, a longtime resident of the Bay Area, wrote his *Concerto for Piccolo and Orchestra* for our soloist, Amy Likar, to premiere with the Oakland Symphony. In spring 2016, he spoke with maestro Michael Morgan about the score, explaining that he wanted to highlight "the unique voice of the piccolo as a solo instrument, not just as an ensemble instrument." Those who know the piccolo only from the rousing strains of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" will be amazed by its softer side—a side also on display in the composer's lovely "Nocturne" (1985) for piccolo and piano, composed as a memorial to his sister. In both the "Nocturne" and the concerto, Rokeach revels, as a reviewer for the *San Francisco*

A poster for Radiant Symphony Season 25/26. The background is dark with a pattern of white dots. The text "RADIANT SYMPHONY" is in large, bold, white capital letters. Below it, "SEASON" is written in a smaller font, followed by "25" and "26" in very large, bold, white numbers. To the right, the text "Season Packages Available Soon" is in bold white letters. Below that, a paragraph of text reads: "You won't want to miss the splendor of inspiring music brought from different parts of the globe. From our holiday and family concerts to an opera and iconic symphonies, there is something for everyone!" At the bottom, it says "See full season details at www.diablosymphony.org." in white text.

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## PROGRAM NOTES: *A Musical Mother's Day: River Journeys*

*Chronicle* puts it, in the piccolo's "sweet-toned, rather vulnerable low register, which is worlds away from the piercing shrillness with which it usually blasts its way through an orchestral texture."

Although some of Rokeach's choral music has embraced overtly political messages—such as the oratorio *Bodies on the Line: The Great Flint Sit-Down Strike* (2023) and the opera-in-progress *Case Closed*—the Piccolo Concerto outlines a more abstract emotional journey. The "proclamations, whispers, [and] rumors" of the opening movement feature a quickly shifting dialogue between the piccolo and members of the ensemble, sometimes headlong and sometimes contemplative. In the second movement, the piccolo's still small voice of hope shines like a light reflecting off the crystalline surfaces of Rokeach's orchestral writing. Whatever tension has accumulated in these two movements bursts forth with abandon in the third, simply titled, "Joy." Rokeach has spoken about his desire to write music with a "celebratory quality" in the face of darkness, difficulty, and despair. In this final movement, then, Rokeach reconciles his exploration of the piccolo's versatility with its customary exuberance, inviting soloist and ensemble to sing, to murmur, to dance, and even to shout with joy.

Rokeach writes: "This concerto was commissioned by the Oakland Symphony...and featured orchestra member Amy Likar as soloist. For years I have loved the innocent, haunting timbre of the piccolo's low register. Sounding so much like a boy soprano, the instrument possesses a unique voice that affects and informs the entire direction of the *Concerto for Piccolo and Orchestra*. Almost every concerto has a dynamic between soloist and orchestra not unlike a leader and a sometimes agreeable, sometimes unruly congregation. To my ear, the piccolo-leader is like a brilliant child, both innocent and profound, encouraging, cajoling, and inspiring a congregation of less wise adults.

"Of course, a three-movement work for piccolo and orchestra cannot remain innocent and haunting from the first bar to the last. To remain engaging, it must display emotional breadth and contrast, and I hope this is revealed throughout the concerto. The first movement opens with a statement, more declamatory than melodic, that is like an urgent proclamation. It traverses emotional terrain that is sometimes anxious, mysterious, quietly intense, powerful. It is in the second movement, "Still We Hope," that the beautiful low register of the piccolo more fully unfolds. Its mood conveys our belief, our yearning, however irrational, that somehow a better world awaits us just around the corner. The movement does not quite resolve. Instead it lands on the solo triangle that introduces the finale, whose mood is celebratory; playful; and finally, ecstatic.

"As I wrote the concerto, I was so fortunate to collaborate with piccoloist extraordinaire Amy Likar, to whom the work is dedicated. Much more than a fine player, Likar is a world-class artist who helped shape and polish its creation. Whatever the concerto's quality, it would be much, much less without her contribution."

Apart from the "Blue Danube Waltz," the most famous of all orchestral river pieces is likely "**The Moldau**" by **Bedřich Smetana**. A devotee and eventually a friend of composer, pianist, and conductor Franz Liszt, Smetana excelled at the highly pictorial writing favored by many Romantic composers. In fact, "The Moldau" is just the most famous portion of a six-part cycle of "tone poems" called *Má Vlast (My Country)*. Each movement depicts an important landmark or historical figure from Bohemian history, including the historic castle overlooking Prague, the ancient warrior maiden Šárka, the country's fields and forests, and two towns associated with legendary Hussite victories. Premiered in the midst of Smetana's unsuccessful struggle with hearing loss, *Má Vlast* (along with the nationalist opera *The Bartered Bride*) has become the composer's calling card—its movement titles appear on his gravestone, and it has been featured in countless memorials, festivals, and celebrations.

As is the case with Price's "The Mississippi River," the sights and sounds of Smetana's Moldau river, known in Czech as the Vltava, slide by with the current as it rushes up from the mountains in the south, through Prague, and on toward the German/Polish border. In preparation for the performance of the entire cycle of tone poems, composer and poet Václav Zelený sketched out the prose program or storyline that has traveled along with the music ever since:

"This composition depicts the course of the Moldau. It sings of its first two springs, one warm the other cold, rising in the Bohemian forest, watches the streams as they join and follows the flow of the river through fields and woods...a meadow where the peasants are celebrating a wedding. In the silver moonlight, the river nymphs frolic, castles and palaces float past, as well as ancient ruins growing out of the wild cliffs. The Moldau foams and surges in the Rapids of St. John, then flows in a broad stream toward Prague. Vysehrad Castle appears ([recalling a] four-note theme from the first of the six symphonic poems) on its banks. The river strives on majestically, lost to view, finally yielding itself up to the Elbe."

According to Smetana's composition journals, he wrote the score of "The Moldau" quickly (in less than three weeks!) after visiting the area in 1867 with conductor and violinist Mořic Anger. Anger later recalled that Smetana, not yet battling deafness, "heard the gentle, poetic song" of the river's tributaries and immediately "within him sounded the first chords of the two motives that intertwine and increase and later grow and swell into a mighty melodic stream." This famous melody links the colorful musical episodes of "The Moldau," and it has become something like an honorary Czech folk song (folk poetry having been newly set to its pleasing strains). Yet its contour has a prehistory, resembling quite closely a tune dating from the Italian Renaissance called "La Mantovana" (rather similar to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star") that spread across Europe, from Scotland to Romania. The familiar melody has a posthistory as well: Many listeners identify it with the Israeli national anthem, "Hatikvah," and one can find its echoes in scores hailing from around the world. Despite these diverse resonances, for the people of the Czech Republic and indeed for most concertgoers, the undulating ebb and flow of the iconic theme immediately call to mind the Moldau's distinctive journey through the landscapes and soundscapes of Bohemian cultural memory.

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The mission of the Diablo Symphony Orchestra is to enrich the lives and cultural climate of our community by performing a diverse repertoire of live classical music and making it accessible to our region's diverse population. We foster the next generation of young musicians, provide educational programs, and offer performing opportunities to local musicians.

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The grant will be used to bring Walnut Creek school children to Diablo Symphony concerts at the Leshner Center for the Arts. The orchestra will also take concerts to Walnut Creek Schools during the school year.

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