

## FEATURE ARTICLE

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Story by *Richie Davis, Senior Reporter*

### Preview of Pioneer Valley Symphony Orchestra Concert

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# Ears Wide Open

David Amram's musical influences transcend boundaries

*"As I was walking that ribbon| of highway,  
I saw above me that endless skyway:  
I saw below me that golden valley:  
This land was made for you and me."*

The year was 1956. Ahmed Bashir, a friend of jazz greats Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins and Charlie Mingus, was crashing at the Lower East Side apartment rented for \$38 a month by fellow musician David Amram.

"You wanna meet Woody?" Bashir asked one morning.

"Woody who?" asked Amram. "Woody Herman?"

"No, Woody Guthrie," Bashir answered. The two men set out walking to a little apartment a few blocks away.

"There was Woody Guthrie — a very small, wiry man sitting at a kitchen table," remembers Amram. "And the amazing thing was he was wearing cowboy boots, and I'd never seen anyone in New York City wearing cowboy boots. And since I was brought up in a farming community of 200, a place called Feasterville, Pa., I could hear something familiar in his speech; the way he spoke and his accent reminded me of the farmers who used to get together at the neighborhood gas station where I grew up."

Amram recalls that the three men "sat swapping tales and drinking coffee at the tiny kitchen table from noon until it was dark outside ... We sat transfixed as he took us on his journeys with him through his stories. Woody didn't need a guitar to put you under his spell and you could tell that when he was talking to us; it wasn't an act or a routine. Like his songs and books and artwork, everything came from the heart."

Amram and Guthrie — who was already suffering from his fatal Huntington's disease but was "still so positive and full of energy" — had more in common than either man probably knew. Both were cultural sponges. Collecting an array of sounds and traditions in their open-ended "hard travelin'," they both spread what they gathered in a freewill offering everywhere they wound up.

Amram — who moved at age 12 to a "checkerboard (black-and-white) neighborhood" in Washington, D.C., and learned to play piano, percussion and French horn — had already befriended Parker and Mingus, played in California's Carmel Bach Festival and served in the Army in Korea before moving to New York.

After all that — as a part of a stew that included studying at the Manhattan School of Music as well as playing French horn with Mingus and bassist Oscar Pettiford — Amram turned his musical ear to Guthrie.

"And in this real Oklahoma drawl he was talking about all the things he was interested in knowing about," said Amram, who's a composer as well as a jazz, classical and folk performer. "He talked about sports, about the Brooklyn Dodgers. And he talked about what it was like to go out to sea and how that gave him a chance to think about everything that happened on land and sort it out. And he knew that I was a jazz player and a budding composer of music and he talked about the different jazz players that he had heard and admired and about ballet and opera and classical music that he enjoyed. He was just one of those people who just had seemingly endless knowledge about so many different things."

Guthrie was an itinerant balladeer who roamed a nation struggling through the Great Depression with ears wide open to the sounds of the people. He captured and conveyed their spirit in "This Land is Your Land," the people's anthem he penned

in 1940 in response to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America."

Amram's "Symphonic Variations on a Song by Woody Guthrie" will have its East Coast premiere at the Pioneer Valley Symphony's Feb. 28 program at the Academy of Music in Northampton. In the program notes, he writes, "When Woody wrote his classic song, 'This Land is Your Land,' the ideals he expressed were not rhetoric or New Age hot air. Times were tough, but he saw he had a job to do to make things better. As we enter hard times today, his philosophy as well as his art ring true, and make us all feel more connected."

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*When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,  
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,  
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:  
This land was made for you and me.*

\* \* \*

Like Guthrie, David Amram is a boundless, wide-eyed pied piper defying easy categorization.

He's collaborated with Leonard Bernstein, with Jack Kerouac, Steve Martin, Langston Hughes, Dizzy Gillespie, Dustin Hoffman, Thelonious Monk, Odetta, Elia Kazan, Arthur Miller, Lionel Hampton, E. G. Marshall, Tito Puente and Willie Nelson.

Amram has composed more than 100 orchestral and chamber music works, scores for theater and film — including "The Manchurian Candidate" and "Splendor in The Grass" — and two operas, including the ground-breaking Holocaust opera "The Final Ingredient."

The most recent of his three books is "Upbeat: Nine Lives of a Musical Cat."

A recent flute concerto, "Giants in the Night," commissioned by Sir James Galway, is dedicated to the memory of Parker, Kerouac and Gillespie. He's also working with author Frank McCourt on a new setting of the Mass "Missa Manhattan."

And, on the night before he heads to the Pioneer Valley for a public lecture and demonstration at Stoneleigh-Burnham School in Greenfield and the concert in Northampton, Amram will take part in a memorial tribute to folk legend Odetta at Manhattan's Riverside Church along with Harry Belafonte, Pete Seeger and others.

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*"In the squares of the city, in the shadow of the steeple,  
By the relief office I seen my people;  
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking  
Is this land made for you and me?"*

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A crowd of thousands sang along last month as Seeger, 89, and Bruce Springsteen led a rousing finale to the Obama inaugural concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

Amram was commissioned by Guthrie's daughter, Nora, to compose "symphonic variations" on the anthem, which had its premiere by the Silicon Valley Symphony last fall. In Amram's work, the timeless melody travels, as Woody did, from an "Oklahoma Stomp Dance" and an Okemah church service to a "Pampa Texas Barn Dance" with a stopover in Mexico and a "Dustbowl Dirge." Then, it lands in New York's ethnic neighborhoods with a Caribbean street festival, a klezmer wedding, a Middle Eastern bazaar and a Salvation Army hymn.

"All this influenced him in that beautiful song that he wrote," said Amram. "Nora told me Woody loved to walk through these places and had an enormous interest in the foods, cultures, music and languages ... People like Woody, Pete (Seeger) and the great Odetta were doing what they call ethnomusicology before that existed."

Amram, 78, who plays 25 musical folk instruments from around the world as well as piano and jazz French horn, is no slouch himself when it comes to mixing it up and getting down.

"My approach is not to be a great Burger King of music, fast-food franchiser, and put everything into one brand, but to rather celebrate all these precious, beautiful things I just bumped into in my travels and was receptive to."

Amram likens his approach to what other composers before him have done: he writes what he knows and feels in his heart. "When I started doing this as a teenager back in the '40s, any kind of career counselor would have said I either had a multiple-personality disorder, was a schizophrenic or had a career death wish," he said.

In a 1960s magazine interview, he claimed that his greatest musical influences were Bach, Mozart, Gillespie, Monk and

countless country, Cajun and Middle Eastern musicians. A response came from the management of the New York Philharmonic — where Amram had just been named the orchestra's first-ever composer in residence: "How can you equate barroom entertainers with the treasures of European music?"

Amram's answer: "It's the purity of intent and an exquisite choice of notes. That's what determines it all."

Last August, he appeared as composer-in-residence at the Democratic National Convention. He conducted his 1969 "Three Songs for America," a setting of words by John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. He also performed Parker's "Now's the Time" and led the Colorado Children's Chorus in a composition based on Native American themes he'd learned a half-century ago.

"I always try to pay attention," Amram said. "If I can really do it correctly — in terms of phrasing, nuance, rhythm and style — then when I actually play it front of people, I'm not putting on a costume and misrepresenting something, but sharing something what I've been blessed to learn."

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*"I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps  
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;  
And all around me a voice was sounding:  
This land was made for you and me."*

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Nora Guthrie sent Amram off to the annual WoodyFest in Okemah, Okla., to get a clearer sense of the roots of the iconic song and the man who wrote it. Amram jammed with musicians there and met with family, friends and fans, including Guthrie's sister.

She'd grown up with Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring" because her mother, Marjorie Guthrie, was in the original Martha Graham ballet production and always thought of her father's song as carrying on the tradition of the "Simple Gifts" Shaker melody incorporated into Copland's score.

Rather than concocting just another "pop-shlock" arrangement of her father's iconic song, she asked Amram to express some of its truer meanings.

He imagined Guthrie hearing the melody first as a church hymn and it carrying in his head as he traveled from place to place.

Amram pointed to Kerouac — with whom he collaborated in the first-ever jazz poetry reading in New York in 1957 and then in the years that followed — as another inspirational, innovating pioneer like Guthrie.

"He celebrated the commonplace, beautiful, everyday things in American life that a lot intellectuals thought were not worthy of consideration," said Amram. "He, Woody and all the great artists of history really knew how to pay attention to everything, and never to disrespect any person or any situation because everything has something to offer."

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*"Nobody living can ever stop me,  
As I go walking that freedom highway;  
Nobody living can ever make me turn back  
This land was made for you and me"*

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In his travels, said Amram, Guthrie managed "to look around and celebrate and rejoice what's here and share those blessings ... Wherever he went, he was open and receptive. He welcomed and found out a lot of things most people just ignored."

As Obama's presidency begins, given the hard times, the public outcry for leadership and the harkening back to the FDR and Lincoln eras, Amram sees a timeliness in re-presenting Guthrie's strong, hopeful tone, "trying to celebrate the continuity and the harmony we have, despite our many differences. The way it resonates in these particular times is almost biblical."

As his Guthrie-inspired work is heard in the Pioneer Valley, says Amram, "I hope it will pulse with the rhythms of our challenges and that we'll feel like dancing through them! I hope we will feel our own much needed strength in it. I hope it will touch our national soul."

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