

## **Ferde Grofe 1892-1972** **(FAME II, Feb. 2006)**

*Start by playing “Thunder of the Waters” from the Niagara Falls suite (Track 10). Our composer for today loved nature and sounds of nature. He chose to use music to mimic the sounds he heard. “Close your eyes and listen to this music. What does it sound like? Where do you think you are?” (You will get answers like “loud music”, “rock concert”, “waterfalls” etc). As a matter of fact, this is one of the loudest pieces of music written by today’s composer. And if you felt you were listening to crashing waves or the sound of a waterfall, our composer would feel that he had succeeded. This piece is from the Niagara Falls Suite (What is a suite? A short musical compositions based on a theme.), and was written in 1961 to commemorate the opening of a power plant in Niagara Falls.*

Keeping in line with the FAME tradition of February being Americans in FAME month, our composer for today, Ferdinand Rudolph von Grofe, who later shortened his name to Ferde Grofe (Fer-dee Grow-fay), is an American. In fact, he is a fairly contemporary American since he died about thirty years ago in 1972. Not only is he an American, he is, for all practical purposes, a Californian as he moved to Los Angeles when he was an infant. Let us listen to another track from this suite as I tell you a little more about Ferde. (Play “Power of the Niagara”, Track 13) What sounds do you think you recognize? (a power plant, sirens, percussion) Ferde was passionate about sounds.

He was born into a musical family in 1892 – his mother was a cellist, his father an opera singer, his grandfather and uncles were all involved with the LA symphony. His parents were of French Huguenot heritage, which explains his unusual name. His mother, who taught him to read music, was his first music teacher. His father died when he was seven and his mother re-married a few years later. Like most of the artists and composers we have talked about, his stepfather felt he should study law or architecture instead of focusing on music. The young, music-loving Ferde decided to run away from home when he was fourteen. He held various jobs, including those of a milkman, newspaper boy, elevator operator, truck driver, in an attempt to support himself and his love for music.

Later on, his family had a change of heart and took him back in and even helped him get a job at the LA symphony. He organized his own jazz band and toured California. On one of his tours, Paul Whiteman, a famous jazz bandleader, discovered him and he joined the Whiteman orchestra where he made his mark by arranging (also known as “orchestrating”) George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody In Blue” in 1924. (What is an arranger? Someone who rewrites a musical composition for other instruments or in another style of music.) He also started composing seriously, but with a sense of humor. One of his friends challenged him to imitate the sound of a bicycle pump – out of that came “Theme and Variations on Noises from a Garage.” He even managed to include the sounds of brooms, a drill, and locomotive bells in “Symphony in Steel.”

Ferde and his wife Anne had two children and died in Santa Monica in 1972 at the ripe old age of 80 (one of those who probably died of old age). In 1997, the U.S. Postal

Service issued a stamp that honored him as one of the Legends of American Music, Classical Composers and Conductors. (*Pass around picture of stamp*)

The suite for today is called “The Grand Canyon Suite.” Let us listen to the first piece (*play Sunrise, Track 5*). Close your eyes and imagine you are out camping and sleeping in your tent. What is the image you get as you listen to this composition? (It starts out quietly and then gets really loud.) Does it remind you of the sunrise? Before the sun comes up on the horizon, it is really quiet; as soon as the sun comes up, the birds start chirping, your neighboring campers wake up because of the light and start making breakfast, clanging their dishes, a small group of deer runs away noisily as a child approaches; it went from silence to noise, much like Grofe’s composition. What element of musical composition did Grofe use to show the transition from dawn to sunrise? (*Dynamics – remind them of crescendo/decrecendo with the “mother telling a child to clean the room” exercise*).

Grofe traveled across the country and visited the Grand Canyon in Arizona. He was so inspired by the vastness and solitude; the sunrises and sunsets; and even thunderstorms out there, that he decided he had to depict them in his music. This gave rise to the Suite you were just listening to. Before we end, let me play the most famous movement of this suite (*play On the Trail, Track 7*). See if you can recognize any sounds. Remember, this is a sound he heard while at the Grand Canyon. *See if they can pick up the braying of the donkeys at the beginning of the movement; does the rhythm suggest the slow walk of a donkey as it moves down the rim of the canyon?*

Clearly Grofe loved sounds – it is fitting that he was so involved with Symphonic Jazz. In his later years, Grofe wrote of the success of his famed Grand Canyon Suite: “This composition was born of sight, sound and sensations common to all of us. I think I have spoken of America in this music simply because America spoke to me, just as it has spoken to you and to every one of us. If I have succeeded in capturing some part of the American musical spirit, I am grateful that I was trained to do so. But this music is your music, and mine only in the highly technical sense that a copyright has been filed away with my name on it. Always we must realize that there is much more to hear. Our land is rich in music, and if you listen you can hear it right now. This is our music you hear, surging forth, singing up to every one of us.”