



Yeeehhaaaa!!!

The rollicking and  
boisterous music of

# Don Gillis

Music inspired  
by the American  
Southwest

Albany  
Symphony  
Orchestra

David Alan Miller,  
Conductor

Music  
that's  
really  
fun!

## Don Gillis: An American Original

*"I think it is unimportant for a composer to wonder about what posterity thinks of him. It is more important that he be faithful to his own beliefs in music. He must be the final critic, and he must write what is his own, regardless of current trends or popularity. If his music reflects folk quality, it must be because it is a natural thing, not a contrived use of folk material merely to be 'American.' Honesty, above all things, is the important ingredient a composer needs."*

- Don Gillis

Among those neglected American composers ripe for rediscovery, none is more deserving than Don Gillis (1912-1978). His light-hearted and good-natured scores, imbued with the flavor and spirit of the great Southwest, are quintessential Americana.

Gillis was born in Cameron, Missouri on June 17, 1912. As a boy, he studied the trumpet and trombone with private teachers and performed in the Cameron Rotary Club band and his high school orchestra. While still in high school he formed a jazz band for which he prepared arrangements and wrote original pieces. The Gillis family moved to Fort Worth, Texas when Don was 17 years old. In 1931, he enrolled in Texas Christian University as a scholarship trombone player, and became student director of the popular Horned Frog Band during his junior year. He graduated in 1935 and moved on to advanced studies in composition and orchestration at North Texas State University in Denton. Following a two-year stint as staff arranger and producer for a local Fort Worth radio station, Gillis became a member of the production team for NBC's Chicago affiliate. It was about this time that his first major works appeared. The year 1937 saw the publication of the orchestral suites *The Panhandle* and *Thoughts Provoked On Becoming a Prospective Papa*; *The Raven* (tone poem); *Willy the Wollyworm* (for narrator and orchestra); and *The Crucifixion*, a cantata for radio.

In 1944, after only a year in Chicago, NBC brought Gillis to New York to serve as chief producer and writer for the prestigious NBC Symphony Orchestra concerts, working with Arturo Toscanini (with whom he established a close personal friendship) and other renowned conductors. He held this post until the demise of the Orchestra in 1954.

Administrative activities continued to occupy Don Gillis in succeeding years. From 1958 to 1961 he was vice-president of the Interlochen Music Camp in Michigan; chairman of the music

department at Southern Methodist University (1967-68); and from 1968 to 1972, he served as chairman of the fine arts department at Dallas Baptist College. In 1973, he was appointed composer-in-residence at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. It was here that he died of a sudden heart attack on January 10, 1978.

The composer's busy schedule did not prevent him from accumulating an astonishingly prodigious catalog of musical works. In a creative career that spanned four decades, he composed prolifically in all forms: 12 symphonies (including one for concert band); seven operas; two Piano Concertos; Rhapsodies for harp and orchestra, and trumpet and orchestra; cantatas; several works for narrator and orchestra; numerous tone poems and orchestral suites; six string quartets and three woodwind quintets; and works for band of every description. One of his last compositions was called *The Secret History of the Birth of a Nation*, written in 1976 for the American Bicentennial.

Under the batons of Arturo Toscanini, Frank Black, Antal Dorati, Guido Cantelli, and the composer himself, the NBC Symphony Orchestra performed many of Don Gillis' works, including the world premieres of his *Fifth* and *Eighth* Symphonies as well as the radio premiere of *Symphony No. 5 1/2*. Gillis never forgot his close personal ties to the Orchestra or to Toscanini. So, when NBC decided to disband the orchestra following Toscanini's retirement, it was Don Gillis who spearheaded the efforts to reconstitute the ensemble as the Symphony Of The Air. In 1967, he composed a heartfelt tribute to the "Maestro," which he called *Toscanini: A Portrait of a Century*.

How to sum up Don Gillis in a sentence or two? He wrote "feel good" music to make people happy. For this uniquely American composer, every night was a Saturday night hoedown!

### **Symphony No. 5 1/2 ("A Symphony for Fun")**

Composed in 1946, the *Symphony No. 5 1/2* is Don Gillis' best-known work. Why the fraction? Because, the composer tells us, the writing of the piece came halfway between the *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, actually interrupting work on the *Sixth*. The music is based on idiomatic devices found in jazz and other folk sources indigenous to the American musical scene. The four short movements are characterized by sly good humor and brilliant orchestration. The movement headings are: "Perpetual Emotion" - "Spiritual?" - "Scherzophrenia" - "Conclusion!"

*Symphony No. 5 1/2* was introduced by Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra in May, 1947, and received its radio premiere in September of the same year by no less than Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. Unfortunately, this performance was never issued commercially, but was preserved on a V-Disc made especially for the Armed Forces Radio Service. That

disc remains a much sought-after treasure.

The first commercial recording (mono) of the piece was made for Decca-London in 1950, as part of a short-lived series devoted to the music of Don Gillis, conducted by the composer.

## Shindig

The ballet, *Shindig*, was composed in 1949 on commission from the Fort Worth Opera Association. It is a riotous spoof of old-time B-Western movies. The principal characters are The Kid, a Dance Hall Girl, the Sheriff (who turns out to be the Villain), and the Drunkard (who is really a Texas Ranger in disguise). Use your imagination to fill in the blanks of this wacky scenario. Suffice it to say that in the end boy marries girl as the marriage is celebrated with a boisterous square dance (what else?).

The revised concert version of *Shindig* was first heard on an NBC Symphony Orchestra concert under the composer's direction, broadcast on June 20, 1953. Other Gillis works on this program included the *Rhapsody for Harp and Orchestra* and the *Atlanta Suite*.

## Encore Concerto

*Encore Concerto* was the first of Don Gillis' two piano concertos. He would later revise this work as his *Concerto for Organ and Band*, a revision he would regret and subsequently disown. In the delightful series of radio programs devoted to his music, produced, written and hosted by Gillis for a New York City radio station in 1965, the composer reminisced about this work and his comments are worth repeating. "I had written this concerto to try to fill a need which some of my piano-playing friends had complained about. They needed, they said, a new concerto which could be combined with concerti of the length of the Liszt or some of the Mozart scores, so that instead of having to play one full, major-length concerto when they appeared, they would now be able to play two instead. So, I worked this one out to play about 17 minutes and said: hey - look everybody, I've written a new, SHORT concerto! And would you believe it?...they received it with an eagerness normally reserved for a solemn walk to the gallows. Nothing! For some, it was already too long, and for some, it just wasn't quite long enough. I was rather astounded. No one ever questioned the musicality of the work, they seemed to like it, but its length was not right for their purposes. So, after a single performance down in Corpus Christi, Texas, I shelved it."

In later years, the versatile NBC staff pianist, Joseph Kahn, championed the concerto and helped rescue it from oblivion. The *Encore Concerto* is divided into three movements. The open

ing is dance-like in character and highly syncopated, with piano and orchestra sharing equal importance. Individual percussion contributions underscore a happy and playful mood. By contrast, the middle movement is a slow blues, with solo piano more prominent than in the preceding section. The finale is Don Gillis at his raucous best and features some glittering and difficult piano writing. In the closing pages, piano and orchestra are once again on equal footing as they race to the finish line. Who will get there first? A brief, no-nonsense coda tells us that it was, indeed, a photo finish!

### **Symphony “X” (“The Big D”)**

This was Don Gillis’ last symphony, but it was not his TENTH! An explanation comes from the composer’s widow, Barbara Gillis. “The ‘X’ doesn’t stand for the number 10. It’s just an example of Don’s wry sense of humor. The ‘X’ is for the unknown.” Written in 1967, the symphony was first played by the Alabama Youth Symphony and later by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. In its four movements, “*The Big D*” evokes some very specific images of the city of Dallas: “All-American City”; “Requiem For a Hero” (remembering JFK’s assassination); “Conventioneer” (a depiction of Dallas as the South’s convention center); and “Cotton Bowl” (a tribute to state fairs and football).

Could this cheerful and entertaining work also be enigmatic? Perhaps “Big D” has a double meaning: a celebration of a great city or a mischievous reference to the composer’s first name. The latter interpretation would certainly be in keeping with the personality of a genial man who celebrated life in his music.

- *Stuart Triff*

### **ALBANY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**

Founded in 1931 by John Carabella, the Albany Symphony Orchestra has evolved artistically under the leadership of music directors Rudolf Thomas, Ole Windingstad, Edgar Curtis, Julius Hegyi, Geoffrey Simon, and David Alan Miller.

Under Maestro Miller’s direction, the Albany Symphony has continued a tradition of championing 20th-century American music through commissioning and recording new works. The Albany Symphony Orchestra has received 14 consecutive ASCAP awards for adventuresome programming and was awarded the first ASCAP/Leonard Bernstein Award for Educational Programming in 1999.

Recordings of the Albany Symphony Orchestra appear on New World Records, CRI, Albany Records, Argo and London/Decca.

## **DAVID ALAN MILLER**

Since becoming Music Director and Conductor of the Albany Symphony Orchestra in 1992, David Alan Miller has initiated a period of remarkable artistic growth, including family concerts, school outreach programs and a new music group, "The Dogs of Desire." Miller's fresh approach to reaching new audiences garnered him a front page feature article in the Wall Street Journal in 1996.

Before coming to Albany, Mr. Miller served as Assistant and then Associate Conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. While in Los Angeles, Miller conducted subscription concerts and programs at the Hollywood Bowl as well as educational concerts.

David Alan Miller has guest conducted orchestras throughout the United States, including the Chicago and San Francisco Symphonies, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the New York Philharmonic. Abroad he has led the Berlin Symphony Orchestra, the London Symphony, the Dresden Philharmonic, the Hong Kong Philharmonic, and the National Arts Center Orchestra in Ottawa, among others. Summer festival appearances have included the Aspen Music Festival, the Bravo Colorado Festival, the Tanglewood Institute, and the Hollywood Bowl.

Mr. Miller has conducted recordings for Deutsche Grammophon, Harmonia Mundi, Decca/London, Argo, and Albany Records.

## **ALAN FEINBERG**

Alan Feinberg has achieved a remarkable reputation as a vanguard pianist and musician who has charted his own unique path in music. With repertoire that ranges from Bach to Babbitt, Mr. Feinberg's creative approach to programming builds a bridge between music of the past and present. Mr. Feinberg has more than 200 premieres to his credit and performances with major orchestras around the world including the Cleveland Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Philharmonia, Scottish Symphony, and the festivals of Edinburgh, Bath, Cambridge, Geneva and Berlin, among others. Three-time Grammy Award nominee, Mr. Feinberg has recorded for Decca/Argo, New World Records, Bridge Records, EMI/Angel, Nonesuch, Catalyst and Albany Records. Mr. Feinberg is an Associate Professor of Piano at the Eastman School of Music and a Visiting Professor at the Juilliard School.

*Violin I*

Jill Levy, Concertmaster  
 Ilana Blumberg, Asst. Concertmaster  
 Elizabeth Silver  
 Margret E. Hickey  
 Van Armenian  
 Olga Dusheina  
 Lilajane Frascarelli  
 Danica Mills  
 Ellen Rademacher  
 Janet Rowe  
 Paula L. Rowe  
 Paula Shaw  
 Harriet Dearden Welther  
 Allison Bailey  
 Maria Carruyo  
 Heather Haskew-Vogel  
 Christine Kim  
 Julia Kim  
 Raymond Zoeckler

*Violin II*

Elaine Gervais, Principal  
 Olga Jourba  
 Barbara Lapidus  
 John Bosela  
 Brigitte Brodwin  
 Lucille Eggert  
 Ouisa Fohrhaltz  
 Michael Glover  
 Margaret Schalit  
 Eileen Cozzaglio  
 Ellen Madison  
 Cynthia Ogulnick  
 Guy Rauscher  
 Evelyn Read  
 David Sariti  
 Julie Signitzer  
 Ubaldo Valli

*Viola*

Susan St. Amour, Principal  
 Emily Schaad

Carla Bellosa  
 Robert Dean  
 Judith Goberman  
 Noriko F. Herndon  
 Marcia Nickerson  
 Christine Orio  
 Harriet Thomas  
 Elizabeth Bonta Moll  
 Elizabeth Nilsen  
 Dean O'Brien  
 Thomas Stevens  
 George Whetstone  
 Stephani Winn

*Cello*

Susan R. Libby, Principal\*  
 Erica Pickhardt\*\*  
 Kevin Bellosa  
 Gail Falsetti  
 Peter Greydanus  
 Catherine Hackert  
 Erik Jacobson  
 Petia Kassarova  
 Zig Mielens  
 Janet Taggart  
 Matthew Capobianco  
 Melissa Irons  
 Ann Kim

*Bass*

Luke C. Baker,  
 Principal\*\*  
 Wendy Kain, Principal\*  
 James Caiello  
 Michael Fittipaldi  
 Phillip Helm  
 Mark Bergman  
 Emil Botti  
 Matthew Dreyfus  
 Marc Schmied  
 Nancy Kidd  
 Jeffery Herchenroder  
 Irving Steinberg

*Flute*

Floyd Hebert, Principal  
 Linda M. Greene  
 Yvonne Hansbrough  
*Piccolo*  
 Linda M. Greene  
*Oboe*  
 Karen Hosmer, Principal  
 Gene Marie Green  
 Emily Agney  
*English Horn*  
 Nathaniel Fossner

*Clarinet*

Susan Martula, Principal  
 Linda Poland  
 Jay Hassler  
 David Sapadin  
 Robin Seletsky  
 Bret Wery  
*Bass Clarinet*  
 Christopher Cullen

*Bassoon*

Stephen Walt, Principal  
 Jonathan Macgowan  
 Michelle Fenton  
*Contrabassoon*  
 Judith Bedford  
 Philip Fedora  
 Edward Marschilok

*French Horn*

William Hughes, Principal\*  
 Victor Sungarian, Principal\*\*  
 Alan Parshley  
 Virginia Abraham  
 Elizabeth Snodgrass  
 Chad Yarbrough  
 Joy Hodges  
 James Cox

*Trumpet*

Eric Berlin, Principal  
 Eric J. Latini  
 René Hernandez  
 Louis Milinazzo  
 Barbara Hull  
 Jeffrey Luke  
 Michael Vrielink  
*Trombone*  
 Megumi Kanda, Principal  
 Cathy Stone  
 Craig Arnold  
 Mark Cantrell  
 Gabriel Langfue

*Tuba*

Matthew Gaunt  
 Gary Sienkiewicz

*Timpani*

Peter Wilson, Principal  
 David Nelson  
*Percussion*  
 Richard Albagli, Principal  
 Mark Foster  
 Scott Stacey  
 Cynthia Lee  
 Anna Watkins

*Piano*

Jonathan Bley  
 Kristen Tuttmann

*Harp*

Lynette Wardle, Principal  
 Marjorie Hartzell  
 \*Symphony X  
 \*\*Shindig

Produced and engineered by Gregory K. Squires, Squires Music Production

Mastered by Wayne Hileman, Squires Music Production

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**David Alan Miller**

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