

Boston Modern Orchestra Project Releases Complete Symphonies Of Lukas Foss



The full Boston Modern Orchestra Project. (Courtesy BMOP)

Keith Powers August 26, 2015



BOSTON — Lukas Foss’s short essay on composition, included with the recent release of his complete symphonies by the [Boston Modern Orchestra Project](#), says that incorporating multiple techniques makes “the resulting music more challenging. One is more likely to want to hear the piece again.” It’s a simple, insightful window into “[Lukas Foss: Complete Symphonies](#),” which BMOP astutely performs under the baton of artistic director Gil Rose.

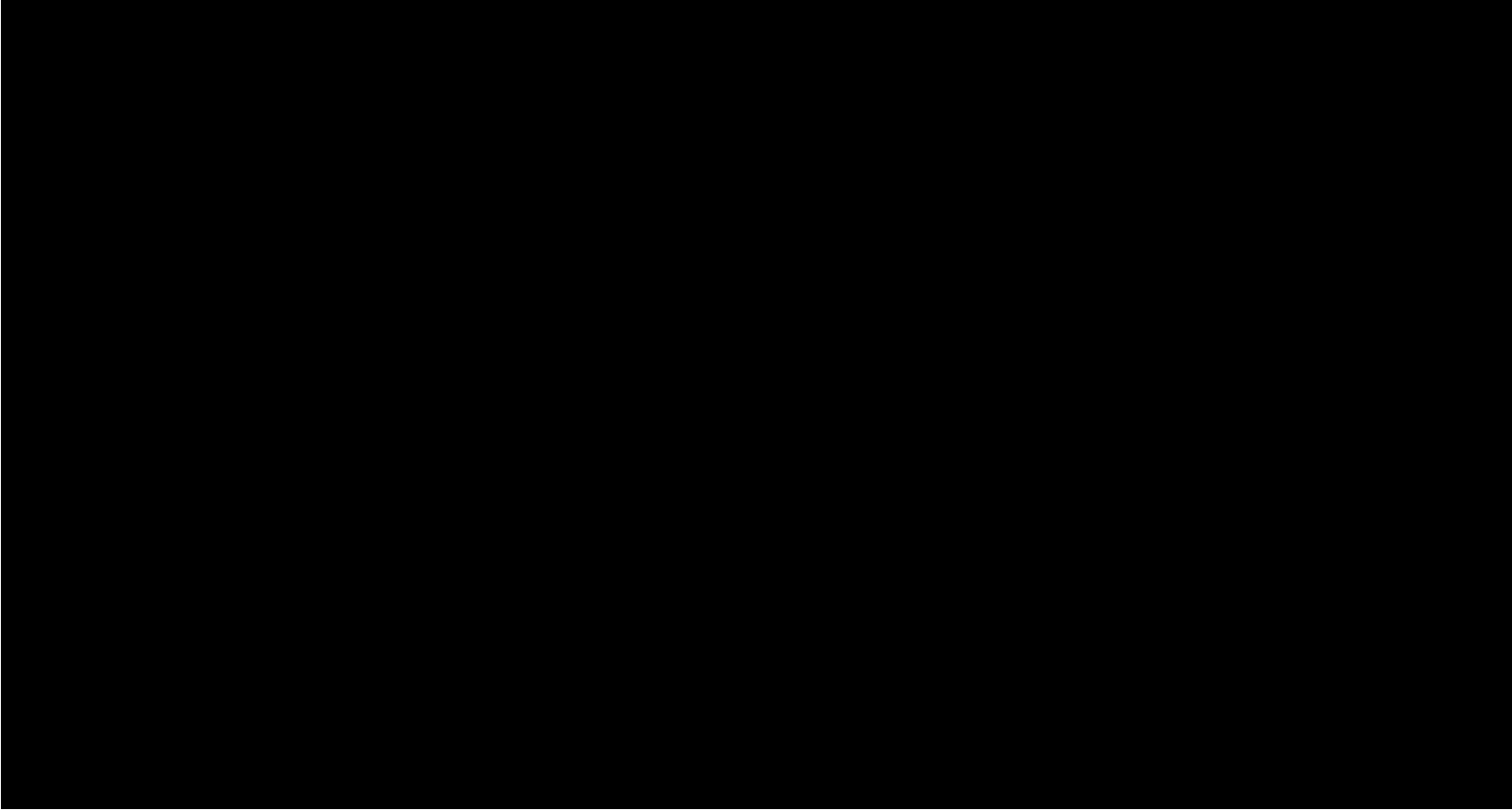
Foss (1922-2009) was born in Berlin, studied at the Paris Conservatory and Curtis, Yale and Tanglewood, learning from Rosario Scalero, Paul Hindemith, Serge Koussevitzky and Fritz Reiner (for conducting), befriending Leonard Bernstein along the way. He later inherited Arnold Schoenberg’s teaching post at UCLA, and in these symphonies you can hear all those influences, as well as the sound-worlds of Bach and Stravinsky. He was also the influential conductor and artistic director at the Ojai Festival, and with the Buffalo, Milwaukee and Brooklyn orchestras. He taught for many years at Boston University.



From left to right: Lukas Foss, at age 24, Ellabelle Davis and Serge Koussevitzky go over the score of a cantata composed by Foss, pianist with the orchestra to be sung by Miss Davis. (AP Photo/FCC)

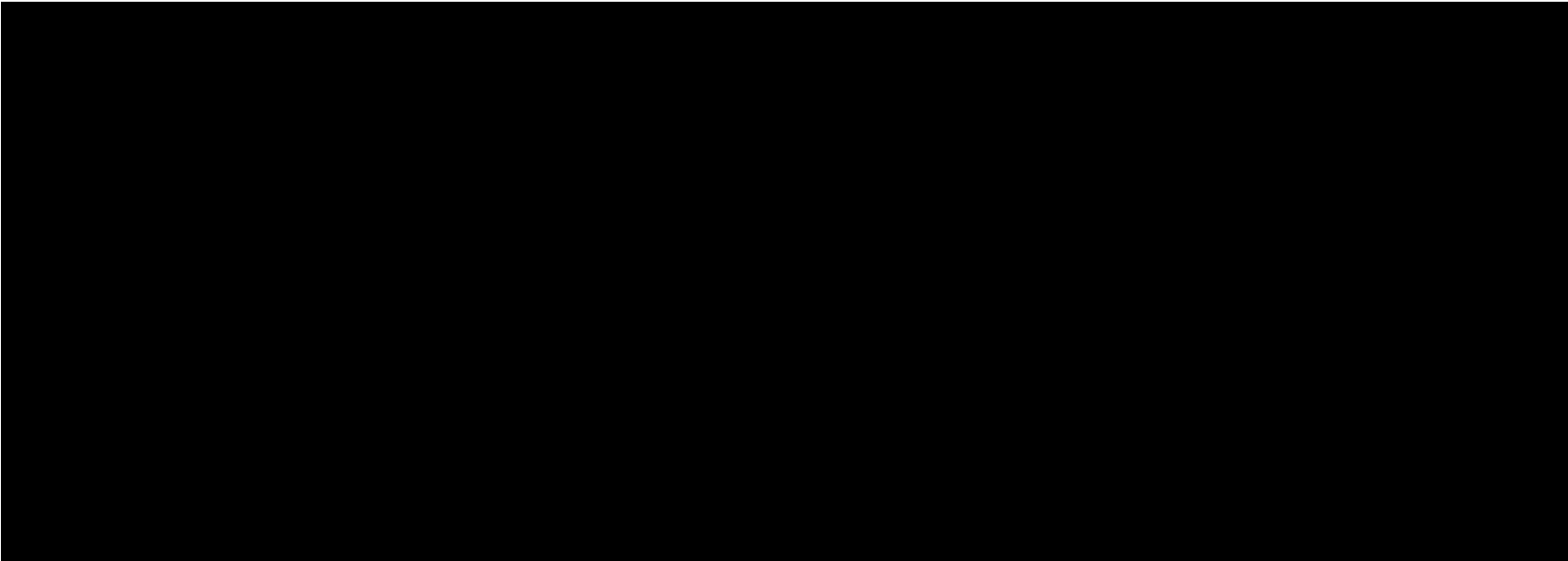
Foss was himself more than anything. His own adaptations of both tonal and atonal techniques were radical, but only to himself: His music is listenable, dense and challenging — not an easy combination to achieve. His four symphonies, the first written in the 1940s, the second in the 1950s and the last two in the '90s, can be dissected for influences, but are entirely Foss's own language.

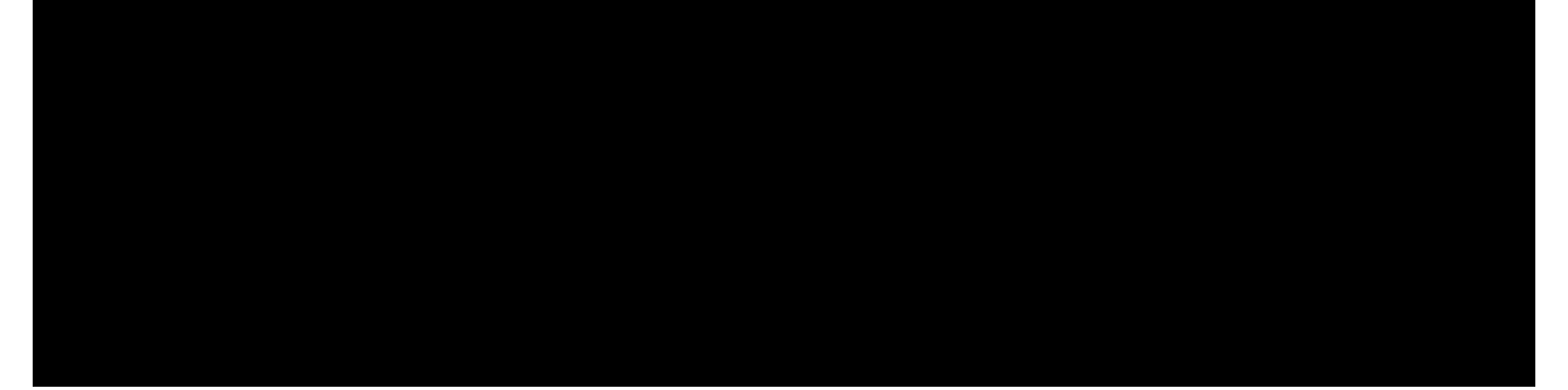
Symphony No. 1, premiered by Reiner and the Pittsburgh Symphony in 1945, offers its Coplandesque optimism without apology. Winds and brass dominate the melodic territory, announcing themes in each movement. Simplicity reigns, instrumentation securely traditional, and its most elegant touches are hard to miss: the verbatim return of the symphony's opening gesture in the fourth movement; the pulses in percussion, not dramatic but dance-like; and the playful give-and-take between sections. Tonality stays firmly in the classical, or more appropriately here, neo-classical range.



Foss was young when the First was composed, but the symphony is hardly derivative. That recurring opening serves as a microcosm of his early skills. At the outset of the first movement, a gentle trill leads to a lush melody, enjoyed note-for-note by the oboe. When it opens the fourth movement, the same gentle trill leads instead to a slashing scale, stretching tonality, still quiet but now investigating possibilities.

Symphony No. 2, "Symphony of Chorales," kneels before Bach. It premiered more than a decade later, again by Pittsburgh but this time under William Steinberg. Foss indicates a separate choral influence for each movement. The opening toccata channels Bach's "Hilf, Gott, daß mir's gelinge." The subsequent andante examines "Herr, ich habe mißgehandelt," layered with counterpoint developed around the musical notation of B-A-C-H (B being B flat, H being B natural). The third movement allegretto tranquillo invokes "Nun ruhen alle Wälder," and the finale, "Nun danket alle Gott."



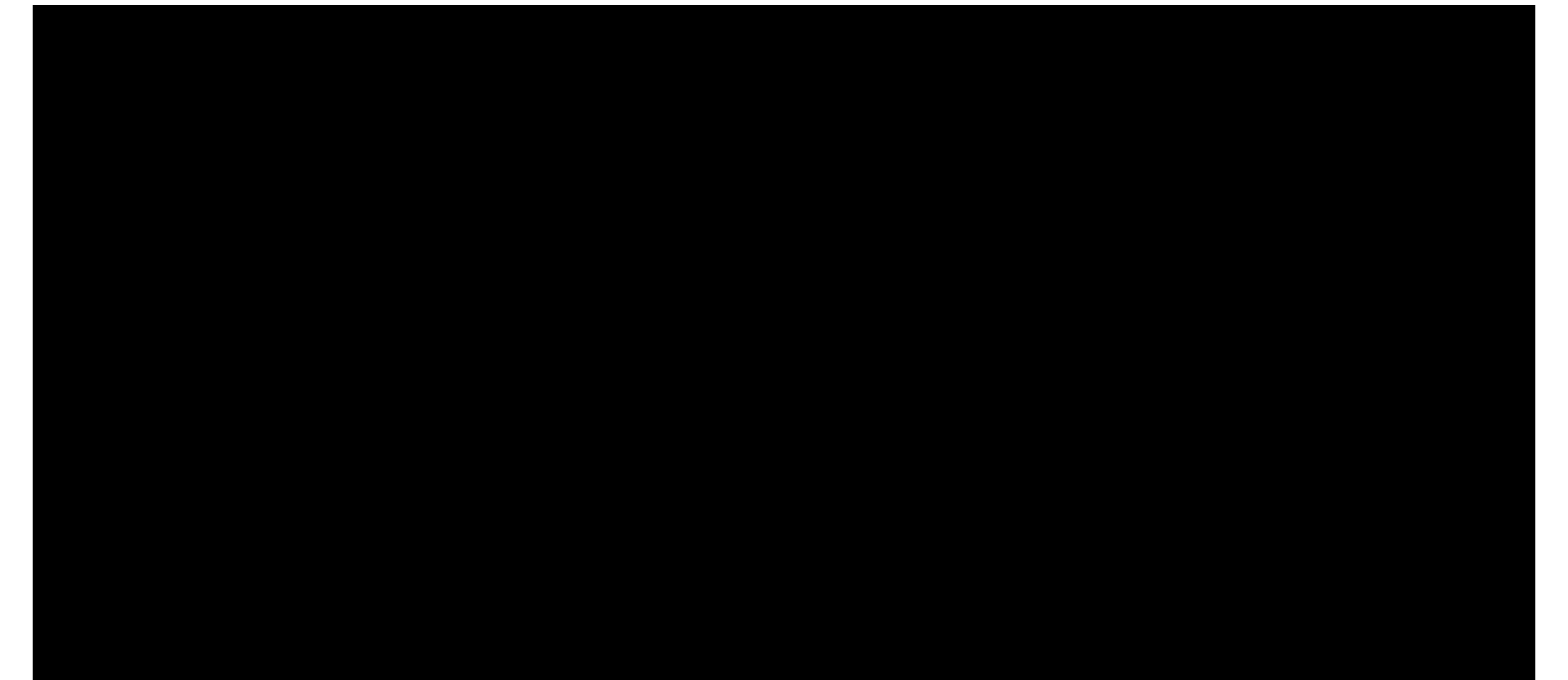


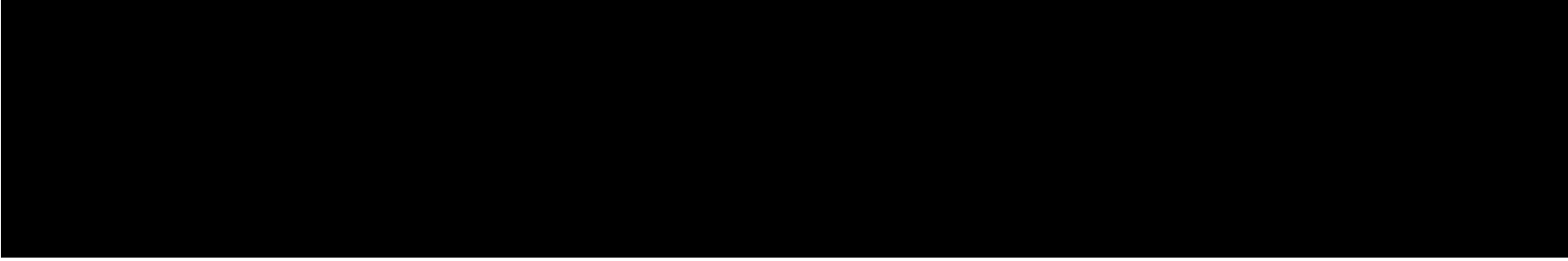
Tributes to Bach, and certainly those contrapuntally exploring B-A-C-H, were nothing new by the mid-1950s. “Symphony of Chorales” invokes Bach’s vocal settings, but buried deeply under dense instrumentation and sharp, episodic gestures. Much of the first movement sounds like derivations without their origins.

But the textures engage easily — origins, and the lack of reference to them, notwithstanding. The second symphony makes a confident exploration of its sound possibilities, bringing the listener along with its impetuous virtuosity. The unusual use of saxophone sounds normal, as it underpins the first movement.

Pizzicato delicately outlines the melody from “Herr, ich habe mißgehandelt” at the outset of the serene andante, but movement away from the source is again the focus here, not movement toward. A 12-tone structure works almost like a ladder, the music deliberately climbing and descending through edifices built with that chorale, and the B-A-C-H motivic ideas.

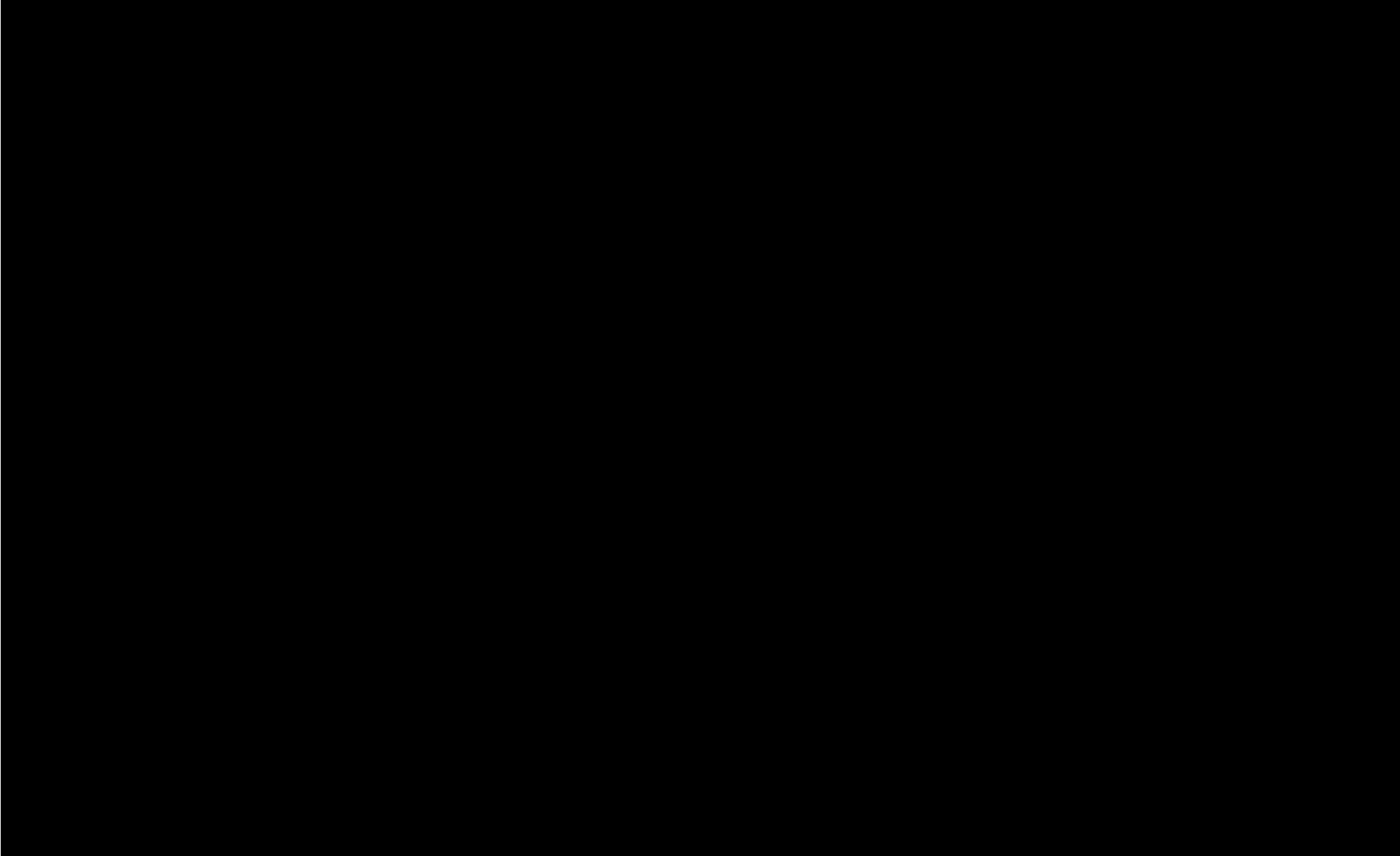
Strings give an exact recounting of “Nun ruhen alle Wälder” to open the allegretto tranquillo, making it more of a theme and variations than any other movement. A dramatic fanfare opens the finale, which returns to an intellectualized recounting of its theme (“Nun danket alle Gott”).





More than three decades passed before the third symphony, “Symphony of Sorrows.” A generous amount of chamber music, sporadic but influential piano scores, smaller settings for orchestra and works for the stage filled the gap. There is no point in summarizing Foss’s output during this time, nor any way to do so if one wanted.

Suffice to say Foss never embraced aleatoric ideas, 12-tone composition, dissonance/consonance juxtapositions or improvisation, but sought out ideas from each technique. More importantly, these are just ideas, and Foss wrote music that, even though densely packed with rhetorical references, references to his own previous works and literary/historical signposts (in this case, the writings of Anne Frank, and T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”), reached out to listeners — not to theorists.

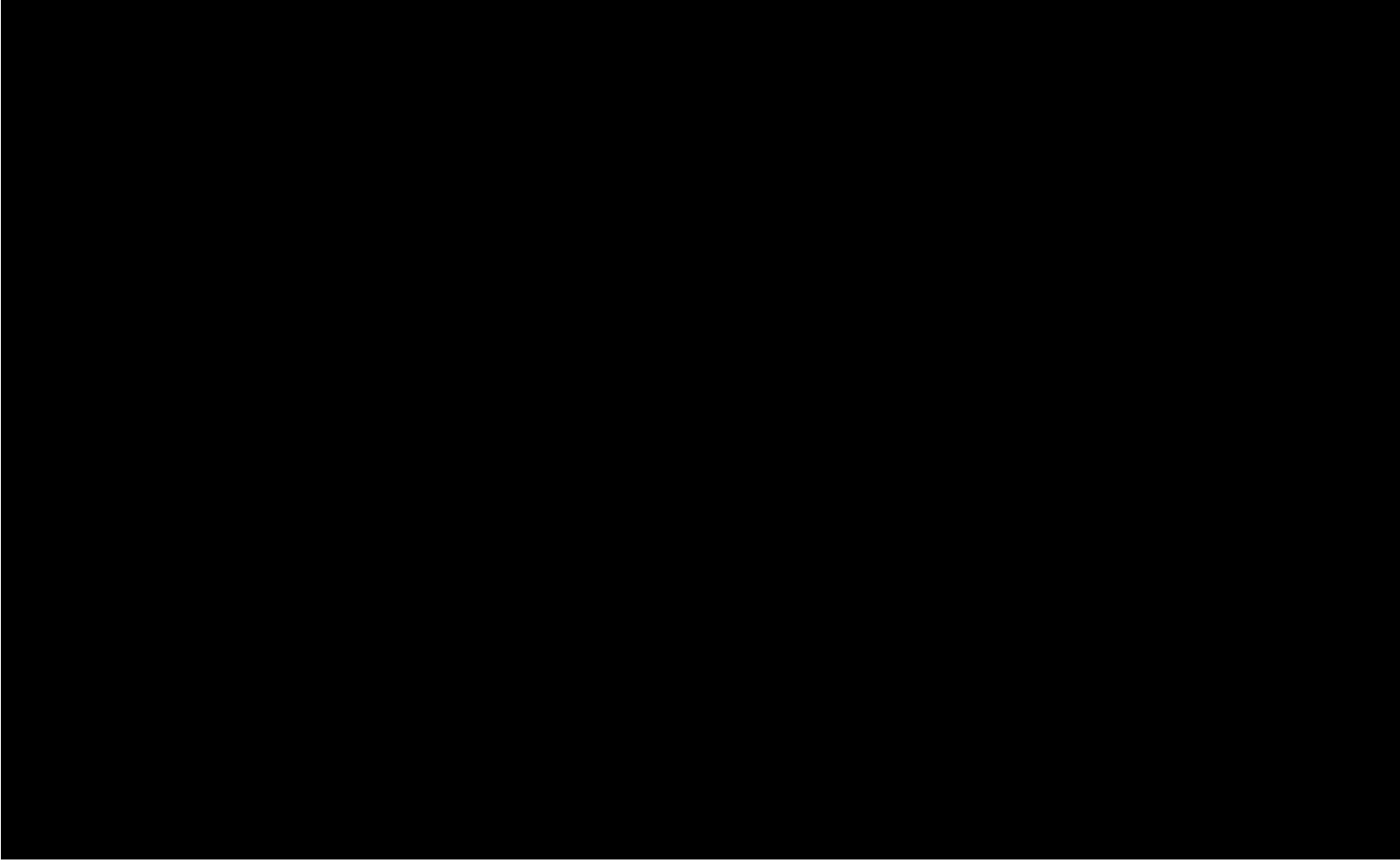


Packed with ideas, the third symphony weaves the tonal and the atonal. Where the first symphony brings back its gentle opening melody to start its finale, the third brings back a 12-tone row. The fugue that occupies the opening movement stutters, rather than collecting ideas as it grows. The elegy written for Anne Frank could not be starker, building midway into a march that overwhelms emotionally, then

disappears.

Both succeeding movements are dense with musical notions. The “Wasteland” movement paints its literary territory (“Withered stumps of time,” for instance) with brash outlines. “Prayer,” the finale, begins cogently but unravels into clusters of changing textures.

The subtitle of the fourth symphony, “Window to the Past,” states its intention bluntly, but all the symphonies were windows to the past in some way. The past in this case is Foss’s own, the symphony brimming with quotations from previous scores.



The Fourth was premiered by the Boston University Symphony Orchestra in 1995 with Foss on the podium. In its largely mellow dynamic range, and surface simplicity, the last symphony sounds like the first. The long second movement — by far the longest of any symphonic movement Foss wrote — a gentle feel throughout, with a wispy violin solo, Jew’s harp and celesta recalling Foss’s much earlier “Prelude in D.” The searching quality of the movement stands out from all the previous symphonies.

These symphonies were recorded in Jordan Hall by the stalwart Boston Modern Orchestra Project. The playing and leadership are secure, deeply informed and cohesive — a tribute to the preparation and understanding Rose and BMOP bring to the music. The [liner notes](#) include Foss’s brief essay, as well as graceful, erudite and helpful notes by Matthew Guerrieri, critic and composer who studied with Foss.



Gil Rose conducting the BMOP. (Liz Lender)

With almost four dozen recordings, celebrating its 25th anniversary this season, BMOP's presence under founder/conductor Rose stands out among contemporary music ensembles. "Lukas Foss: Complete Symphonies," with Gil Rose conducting the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, is available on the [BMOP website](#).

Keith Powers, former music critic at the Boston Herald, now freelances for a number of newspapers and magazines. Follow him on Twitter at [@PowersKeith](#).

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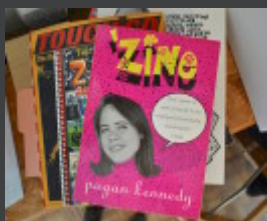
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