

# **Ansel Adams: America**

## **by Chris Brubeck and Dave Brubeck**

### **Program Notes**

"Photographers are in a sense composers, and the negatives are their scores."  
Ansel Adams (1902 - 1984)

In 2006 I had lunch with Susan Carson, a dynamic patron of the Arts in California. She asked me what I thought about the idea of an orchestra performing original music while Ansel Adams' photographic images were projected in the concert hall. I instantly thought this was a fabulous concept and wished it had been my idea! Ms. Carson met with me because she had been impressed with my innovative compositions created under the auspices of the "Meet The Composer/Music Alive" program. She saw (and heard) that I was quite capable of thinking "out of the box" when I wrote the music and script for "Mark Twain's World" which featured actors, not singers, with the orchestra. "Ansel Adams: America" would offer a different set of challenges. The key ingredient for the whole project would be to get permission from the Ansel Adams Trust to allow us to project his photographs and to create music that would enhance the visual experience. We respect the compositional integrity of Ansel Adams' art, and project the full and complete images without close-ups, panning or any other video techniques.

The merging of music and photography made perfect sense when we discovered that Ansel Adams was well on his way to becoming a serious concert pianist until he was seduced by the beauty of Yosemite and succumbed to the lure of photography. This fact inspired me to read the wonderful book "Ansel Adams, An Autobiography." In these pages I learned that Ansel, as a young man, yearned to practice piano while in Yosemite which led him to the old Chickering upright piano at the home of the owner of Best's Studio. While practicing there, he met, fell in love, and eventually married the proprietor's daughter, Virginia Best.

In Ansel's autobiography (which I highly recommend), I was impressed with his philosophical views, beautiful writing, and keen analysis and comparison of musical and photographic techniques. He wrote: "Photographers are in a sense composers, and the negatives are their scores." He was an artist and thinker whose experiences were as monumental as El Capitan. Growing up in San Francisco, Ansel Adams experienced a variety of historic events that would influence his art -- the Great Earthquake of 1906; the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in 1915 (which he experienced as part of his unique home-schooling, his father requiring him to go to the Expo every day for a year!), to the building of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges. I thought his story was so interesting that I didn't want to simply project his photographs, but wanted to present a glimpse of his remarkable story to the audience.

Ansel Adams evolved in the expansive currents of 20th Century America. His lifelong dedication to the Sierra Club along with his powerful photographs of the American landscape helped shape the environmental movement in our country. Because of his talent, hard work, and good fortune, he became a pioneer and icon of an emerging new art form. I couldn't help but think of my father, who grew up as a cowboy in the foothills of California near Stockton. Even there, he felt the artistic influences of a booming San Francisco. These changes in the mid-20th century affected both Ansel and Dave, propelling them and their respective art forms, photography and jazz, into the new frontiers of American culture. Recognizing their similar histories spurred me to ask Dave to join me in this compositional endeavor. We had collaborated before and I enjoyed the process immensely. At age 88, Dave was reluctant to commit to such a big project. I gave my father and my mother, Lola, the Ansel Adams autobiography to read, and they were hooked!

Dave began to write a piano score that was driven in style by Bach and Chopin, immortal music learned and played by Adams as a young man. This music was also part of Dave's unusual environment, growing up on a ranch where his father was a cowboy, and his mother was a Classical pianist who

often played Bach and Chopin. Dave's own style (in part inspired by his studies with Darius Milhaud after World War II at Mills College) evolved to be both polytonal and "jazzy." This heritage has naturally influenced my compositional language as well. Because the architecture of some of Adams' photographs was so like the complex structure of a Fugue, I suggested to my father that he write one to be the heart of this new composition. Dave's enthusiasm and creativity inspired him far beyond the Fugue. He devised many wonderful themes and ideas which we expanded and polished together. Once the piano score was complete, my wife Tish and I began to select additional images to be shown throughout the developing score. I continued to compose and reshape the piece and orchestrate more specifically to exact images. Dave, Lola, Tish, and I had many good times together "auditioning" different photographs to be shown with various passages of music. Jeff Sugg, an award-winning visual production designer, met with us and also added his opinions and expertise regarding transitions between the images.

The beauty of Ansel Adams' photography inspired Dave and me to create this music. We hope you'll enjoy his breathtaking photographs and the way our new composition surrounds these images.

Chris Brubeck  
Wilton, Connecticut