

Peoria Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
March 10, 2018
Michael Allsen

This All-American concert brings together works by two of the greatest 20th-century composers from our country - all works from the 1930s and 1940s. Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring* - his most famous ballet score - is an uplifting picture of the wide-open spaces and can-do spirit of the American frontier. We follow this with three works by Copland's contemporary Samuel Barber. The heartbreaking *Adagio for Strings* was written when Barber was just 25, but still remains his most familiar work - a musical touchstone of mourning. The winner of the PSO's First International Solo Competition sings Barber's wistful *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)
Appalachian Spring Suite

Appalachian Spring was written in 1943-44 for Martha Graham's dance company, and the ballet was premiered in Washington DC on October 30, 1944. The orchestral suite heard at these concerts was written in 1945, and premiered that year by the New York Philharmonic.

"It is essentially the coming of a new life. It has to do with growing things. Spring is the loveliest and saddest time of the year." - Martha Graham

Appalachian Spring was created in response to a 1942 commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation of the Library of Congress, for a new ballet by the Martha Graham dance company. Graham, who knew Copland's earlier ballet scores *Billy the Kid* (1938) and *Rodeo* (1942), asked him to provide a score for this new ballet, which was also to be on an American theme. The result, which Copland titled simply *Ballet for Martha*, is one of the landmark works of American twentieth-century music. (The title *Appalachian Spring* was applied by Graham, who took it from a poem by Hart Crane.) The original version of the score, written for a small group of woodwinds, strings and piano, won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for music, and Copland quickly produced two more versions of the score in 1945: a suite for full orchestra, and a complete ballet score for full orchestra.

The scenario for Graham's ballet centers around a young pioneer couple who are about to be married in early 19th-century Pennsylvania, and around their newly-built homestead. The couple receives visits and advice from neighbors and a revivalist preacher, and are finally left alone to their new lives and home. Copland's music is optimistic and evocative, calling up images of strength, courage, and religious faith from the American frontier. His earlier ballets had used folk songs to create an American quality, but nearly all of the melodic material in *Appalachian Spring* is Copland's own -

only at the climactic point of the ballet does he introduce folk material in the guise of an old Shaker melody.

The *Appalachian Spring Suite* is cast in eight sections, which are played without pauses. In his notes to the original performance in 1945, Copland gave the following description of the suite:

- “1. *Very slowly*. Introduction of the characters, one by one, in a suffused light.
2. *Fast*. Sudden burst of A Major arpeggios to start the action. A sentiment both elated and religious is the keynote to this scene.
3. *Moderate*. Duo for the Bride and her Intended—scene of tenderness and passion.
4. *Quite fast*. The Revivalist and his flock. Folksy feelings—suggestions of square dances and country fiddlers.
5. *Still faster*. Solo dance of the Bride—presentiment of motherhood. Extremes of joy and fear.
6. *Very slowly (as at first)*. Transition scene to music reminiscent of the introduction.
7. *Calm and flowing*. Scenes of daily activity for the Bride and her Farmer-Husband. There are five variations on a Shaker theme. The theme, sung by a solo clarinet, was taken from a collection of Shaker melodies compiled by Edward D. Andrews, and published under the title *The Gift to be Simple*. The melody I borrowed and used almost literally is called ‘Simple Gifts’. It has this text:
 ‘Tis the gift to be simple,
 ‘Tis the gift to be free,
 ‘Tis the gift to come down
 Where we ought to be.
8. *Moderate. Coda*. The Bride takes her place among her neighbors. At the end, the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house. Muted strings intone a hushed, prayer-like passage. The close is reminiscent of the opening music.”

Samuel Barber (1910-1981) **Adagio for Strings, Op.11**

Barber composed this work as a movement for string quartet in 1936, and rearranged for string orchestra in 1937. The first performance was given in New York City on November 5, 1938.

In 1937, when the venerable conductor Arturo Toscanini was organizing the group that was to become the NBC Symphony Orchestra, he expressed an interest in programming new music by American composers. His colleague Artur Rodzinsky suggested the young Samuel Barber. Toscanini contacted Barber and Barber promptly sent two new works: his *First Essay for Orchestra*, and an arrangement for string orchestra of the *Adagio* movement of his *String Quartet No. 1*. Barber waited through the orchestra’s first season for a reply and when the scores were finally returned without comment, he began dejectedly to look for a new orchestra to play them. In the summer of 1938, Barber was in Italy with his partner Gian Carlo Menotti. Menotti suggested a visit to the Toscaninis at their summer villa, but Barber refused to go. When Toscanini

asked why Barber had not come, Menotti offered a weak excuse about Barber being ill. Toscanini replied: "Oh, he's perfectly well; he's just angry with me, but he has no reason to be. I'm going to do *both* of his pieces." (It seems that Toscanini had already memorized the scores—he did not ask for them again until the day before the concert!) Both works were successful at their November 1938 premiere, and Toscanini recorded both soon afterwards with the NBC Orchestra.

The *Adagio for Strings* has come to have an association with tragedy—particularly with great public events of death and mourning - that Barber never really intended. It was played directly after the radio announcement of President Roosevelt's death in 1945, and similarly after the Kennedy assassination in 1963. (In my case, I can well remember performing in an orchestra concert a few weeks after the 9/11 attacks, when the *Adagio* was played at the beginning - to devastating emotional effect - as a tribute to the victims.) Because of these associations, it has also been used in film and television to underscore tragic moments—most notably in *Platoon* and *The Elephant Man*, but also in many other scores. It has also appeared in pop music, as in the introduction to rapper Sean "Diddy" Combs's 1997 tribute to a murdered friend, *I'll Be Missing U*. Shortly after Barber's death, composer Ned Rorem said of the *Adagio*: "If Barber, twenty-five years old when it was completed, later reached higher, he never reached deeper into the heart."

It is the stark simplicity of this music that makes it so effective. A simple diatonic melody builds gradually from its quiet beginning through thickening texture, canonic imitation, and increasing dissonance to an emotional climax as the violins reach their highest register. After this peak, there is a brief return to the opening texture and a quiet conclusion that dies away to nothingness.

Samuel Barber Capricorn Concerto, Op.21

Barber composed this work in 1944, and it was first performed in New York City on October 8 of that year.

Barber's most important supporter in his early career was Mary Curtis Bok, a formidable patron of the arts. He first came to her attention as a very young student at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia - the conservatory that she founded in 1924. Curtis Bok was an unfailing source of support for both Barber and his partner Gian Carlo Menotti, and in 1943 she helped them buy a house in Mount Kisco, New York. Barber and Menotti named their new home "Capricorn" in honor of the quality of the light that filled the house in winter. It would be their beloved retreat for nearly 30 years. In late 1942, Barber was drafted into the US Army, and initially feared that this would be the end of composition until the war was over. Fortunately, he came to the attention of a sympathetic general, whose wife had convinced him that Barber would be of greater service to the country composing, rather than carrying a rifle. PFC Barber spent the rest of the war assigned to West Point New York, just 40 miles from Mount Kisco, meaning that for the most part, he was free to live and compose at home. Barber held

up his side of the bargain, composing several works designed to assist with the war effort (including the wildly successful *Commando March*), but the relative freedom of his situation also allowed him to experiment with new styles.

The *Capricorn Concerto*, named for his home in Mount Kisco, was the last work he composed before being honorably discharged from the Army, and it is also a departure from his earlier style. Stravinsky, Ravel and others worked in a “neoclassical” style in the 1920s in 1930s: adapting 18th-century musical forms and styles in a 20th-century context. The *Capricorn Concerto* is Barber’s experiment in neoclassical form, adapting the scoring and musical form of the Baroque concerto grosso, in which a group of soloists are placed in contrast to the full orchestra. Barber in fact seems to have had a particular concerto in mind, Bach’s second “Brandenburg” concerto: he uses similar instrumentation, flute, oboe, and trumpet solo parts with a string orchestra.

Unlike Bach’s concerto, where these soloists and orchestra play in the same style throughout, in Barber’s opening movement (*Allegro ma non troppo*) there are two sharply contrasting styles: the often strident, nervous opening music of the strings, and the more lyrical lines introduced by flute, trumpet and oboe. The soloists introduce their idea in the form of a fugue, and this is eventually developed by the strings as well. Soloists then pick up the more disjointed style of the opening, and much of the movement develops this almost frantic music. Near the end, there is a sudden halt, as the trumpet plays a rather wistful solo line before a short coda. The *Allegretto* has a clear three-part form: the outer panels feature dry, witty playing by the soloists above an almost maniacally insistent accompaniment by the violas. In the center there is a brief contrasting section played by strings and oboe only. The finale (*Allegro con brio*) is the movement that most clearly resembles a Baroque concerto grosso, at least in form and texture—though the harmony and the complicated, ever-shifting rhythm is clearly from the 20th century. The movement is held together by several repeats of a fanfare figure heard at the very beginning. Between these statements, there is constant development of a couple of short motives, until near the end, when Barber interjects a brief, solemn episode before a final statement of the fanfare

Samuel Barber

Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op.24

Barber composed this work in 1947 for soprano Eleanor Steber. She sang the premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, directed by Serge Koussevitsky, on April 9, 1948.

In 1947, when Serge Koussevitsky asked Barber for a work for soprano and orchestra, Barber turned to a James Agee prose poem, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, written in 1935, was a sketch of a summer night from Agee’s childhood, a time shortly before the death of his father. (It would later appear as the preface to his posthumously published novel *A Death in the Family*.) Barber’s choice of text seems to have been deeply personal—both his father and his aunt were gravely ill as he was composing it, and both

died within a few months. The poem's nostalgia, wistfulness, and underlying sadness resonated strongly - as Barber later recalled: "Agee's poem was vivid and moved me deeply, and my musical response that summer of 1947 was immediate and intense. I think I must have composed *Knoxville* within a few days... You see, it expresses a child's feelings of loneliness, wonder and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep."

The style of Agee's writing in *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* was deliberately spontaneous - in the program note to the premiere, he described his process: "I was greatly interested in improvisatory writing, as against carefully composed, multiple-draft writing: i.e., with a kind of parallel to improvisation in jazz, to a certain kind of 'genuine' lyric which I thought should be purely improvised..." The free-flowing style Barber adopted in setting this text, which he described as "lyric rhapsody," fits it perfectly. Barber's version is laid out in several interconnected sections, tied together with a recurring refrain. After a brief introduction the soprano enters above a softly rocking background, painting a dreamy and gentle portrait of a warm southern night. Barber does a bit of musical word-painting, as in the mechanical music that introduces Agee's description of a passing streetcar. At "Now is the night one blue dew" the style changes again, to luminous quiet background to the soprano. An echo of the introduction leads into the next panel, a calm picture of the family, lying quietly on quilts "on the rough wet grass of the back yard." Barber gradually interjects a note of darkness as the text hints of the "sorrow of being on this earth." He accompanies the climactic prayer "May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away." with subtly agitated music. The music of the introduction reappears once more for the final section—the sleepy child is put to bed, but the text ends with the uneasy "...but will not ever tell me who I am" before a hushed ending.

program notes ©2017 by J. Michael Allsen

for program page

Not sure of the exact format of your program page, but here are the composer names, titles, and movements as I use them in the notes.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)
Appalachian Spring Suite

1. *Very slowly*
2. *Fast*
3. *Moderate*
4. *Quite fast*
5. *Still faster*
6. *Very slowly (as at first)*
7. *Calm and flowing*
8. *Moderate. Coda*

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)
Adagio for Strings, Op.11

INTERMISSION [please confirm]

Samuel Barber
Capricorn Concerto, Op.21

Allegro ma non troppo
Allegretto
Allegro con brio

John McMurtery, flute
James Riggs, oboe
Ethan Bartley, trumpet
[please confirm soloists]

Samuel Barber
Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op.24

???, soprano

Barber, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*
(text by James Agee)

[We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.]

...It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars. People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt: a loud auto: a quiet auto: people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard, and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squaring with clowns in hueless amber. A streetcar raising its iron moan; stopping; belling and starting, stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts; the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter; fainting, lifting, lifts, faints foregone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose.

Low in the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes... Parents on porches: rock and rock. From damp strings morning glories hang their ancient faces.

The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums.

On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there.... They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine,...with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night. May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away.

After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.