

Classics 5

Program Notes by Ken Meltzer

HYMN OF THANKSGIVING

Composed in 1999

ROBERT WENDEL

Born in Bridgeport, Connecticut on June 21, 1951

American musician Robert Wendel's versatile and successful musical career encompasses the roles of conductor, composer, arranger and publisher. Mr. Wendel has guest conducted many of the major symphony orchestras in the United States, including those in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Minnesota, Baltimore, Atlanta, Cincinnati and Dallas. Robert Wendel has also toured the US and Europe as conductor for jazz artist Harry Connick, Jr., including the PBS special "Romance from Paris" and concert for the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway. Robert Wendel's many compositions include works for musical theater, symphony orchestra, PBS television and television commercials.

Mr. Wendel's *Hymn of Thanksgiving* is a setting of the traditional hymn, "We Gather Together." His arrangement allows for performances by large or small orchestras. Additionally, the arrangement may be performed with or without vocalists (soloists and/or chorus). Mr. Wendel's *Hymn of Thanksgiving* was featured in the 1999 Thanksgiving television special with conductor Erich Kunzel and the Cincinnati Pops.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, oboe, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, two trombones, bass trombone, tuba, percussion, harp, celeste, and strings.

Duration: ca. 3 minutes.

VARIATIONS ON "AMERICA"

Composed in 1891; orchestrated by William Schuman in 1963

Premiered on May 20, 1964 in New York, with André Kostelanetz conducting the New York Philharmonic

CHARLES IVES

Born in Danbury, Connecticut on October 20, 1874

Died in New York on May 19, 1954

Charles Ives originally composed his *Variations on "America"* ("My country, 'tis of thee...") for solo organ in 1891, and probably gave its first performance at the Methodist Church in Brewster, New York, on February 17, 1892. Even at this early stage of his life (age 17), Ives demonstrated a boundless enthusiasm for American music and iconoclastic approach that would make him a unique force. Ives's father, George, protested some of the highly revolutionary features in the score, including two polytonal interludes. "Father

would not let me play them in the Brewster concert, as they made the boys laugh out loud,” Ives recalled. George Ives also objected to the fourth variation Polonaise, “which had no place in our country and was also in a sad minor key.”

Still, it seems that Ives’s *Variations on “America”* pleased many of its early listeners. Years later, Ives recalled that when the melody of “America” was clearly presented in his composition, people would join in singing the anthem, “even if occasionally made the boys go marching down the aisles.” As for Ives, he confided to organist E. Power Biggs that he enjoyed performing the fast pedal music in the final variation almost as much as he loved playing baseball. Now that’s an American composer!

In 1963, Broadcast Music Incorporated commissioned William Schuman to orchestrate Ives’s 1891 work. Schuman completed the score on October 27, 1963. André Kostelanetz and the New York Philharmonic gave the premiere on May 20, 1964. Schuman’s masterful orchestration complements—and arguably even heightens—the ebullient spirit of Ives’s original. Schuman’s orchestration of Ives’s *Variations on “America”* is a worthy tribute by one great American composer to another.

Schuman’s orchestration of Ives’s Variations on “America” is scored for two piccolos, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings.

Duration: ca. 7 minutes

KNOXVILLE: SUMMER OF 1915, OPUS 24

Composed in 1947

Premiered on April 9, 1948, at Symphony Hall in Boston, Massachusetts, with Eleanor Steber, soprano, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Serge Koussevitsky

SAMUEL BARBER

Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania on March 9, 1910

Died in New York on January 23, 1981

Begun in response to a request from conductor Serge Koussevitsky for a symphonic vocal work, Samuel Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* was commissioned by the American soprano, Eleanor Steber (1916-1990). Steber’s career at the Metropolitan Opera in New York spanned more than a quarter-century. A remarkably versatile artist, Steber’s operatic roles encompassed works by such composers as Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini, Richard Strauss and Berg. On January 15, 1958 at the Met, Steber created the title role in Barber’s opera, *Vanessa*.

Steber’s commission was the first ever by an American singer for a work scored for solo vocalist and orchestra. For the text, Barber chose a portion of a 1938 prose-poem by the American author, James Agee, “Knoxville: Summer of 1915.” The beautifully written text expresses the soon-to-be destroyed peace of Agee’s childhood in the months before his father’s death in a car accident. Barber was immediately taken by Agee’s text, which had a profound personal resonance for him:

I had always admired Mr. Agee's writing and this prose-poem particularly struck me because the summer evening he describes in his native southern town reminded me so much of similar evenings when I was a child at home. I found out, after setting this, that Mr. Agee and I are the same age, and the year he described was 1915, when we were both five. You see, it expresses a child's feeling of loneliness, wonder, and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep.

The premiere of Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* took place on April 9, 1948, at Symphony Hall in Boston, Massachusetts. Steber was the soloist, accompanied by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and its Music Director Serge Koussevitsky. A year later, Barber revised the score, making some cuts and re-orchestrating the work for a more intimate ensemble. The revised version premiered at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., on April 1, 1950.

Since its premiere, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* has remained one of the beloved works for vocalist and orchestra. Barber, himself a fine singer with a lovely baritone, always wrote beautifully for the human voice. Indeed, virtually all of his music—be it vocal or instrumental—is imbued with poignant lyricism.

The marriage of Agee's text and Barber's music is pure magic. Steber, who grew up in Wheeling, West Virginia, commented about *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*: "That was *exactly* my childhood!" American soprano Leontyne Price was another celebrated interpreter of Barber's compositions, including *Knoxville*. Price, who was born in Laurel, Mississippi, in 1927, said of the work: "As a southerner, it expresses everything I know about my roots and about my mama and father...my home town...There's no cataloguing a great artist, it's just delving into the beauty of the Agee poem and setting it right to music. You can *smell* the south in it."

The score calls for soprano solo, piccolo, flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bassoon, two horns, trumpet, triangle, harp, and strings.

Duration: ca. 16 minutes

***Knoxville: Summer of 1915* - Text by James Agee (1909-1955)**

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.

SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN B-FLAT MAJOR, OPUS 100

Composed in 1944

Premiered on January 13, 1945 at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, with the composer conducting the State Symphonic Orchestra of the U.S.S.R.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born in Sontsovka, Russia on April 23, 1891

Died in Moscow, Russia on March 5, 1953

Sergei Prokofiev offered the following comments on the work that is generally regarded as his symphonic masterpiece:

In the summer of 1944 I wrote my Fifth Symphony, to which I attach great importance—firstly because with this work I returned to the genre of the symphony after a break of 16 years. The Fifth, which I conceived as a symphony of the greatness of the human spirit, a song of praise of free and happy mankind, may be said to conclude an entire creative period.

Prokofiev spent that summer of 1944 in the town of Ivanovo, located outside of Moscow. There, the Soviet Composers' Union had established a House of Creative Work. The rural atmosphere of Ivanovo provided Soviet composers with a haven from the miseries of wartime Russia, allowing them the opportunity to focus upon their music. Prokofiev certainly found the serene atmosphere at Ivanovo a favorable creative venue. In addition to composing the Fifth Symphony during that summer of 1944, Prokofiev completed his magnificent Piano Sonata No. 8, Opus 84.

The premiere of Sergei Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony took place on January 13, 1945, at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory. Prokofiev conducted the State Symphonic Orchestra of the U.S.S.R. in a program that also included his First ("Classical") Symphony and *Peter and the Wolf*.

It was a time of great hope in Soviet Russia—the end of the lengthy, horrific world conflict was finally in view. When Prokofiev climbed the podium to conduct his Fifth Symphony, artillery fire from Soviet cannons sounded from outside the concert hall. The cannon fire was a tribute to the Red Army's crossing of the Vistula on their way into Germany.

Sviatoslav Richter, the legendary Russian pianist, attended the concert. The events surrounding the premiere made a profound impression upon the young artist:

The Great Hall was illuminated, no doubt, the same way it always was, but when Prokofiev stood up, the light seemed to pour straight down on him from somewhere up above. He stood like a monument on a pedestal. And then, when Prokofiev had taken his place on the podium and silence reigned in the hall, artillery salvos suddenly thundered forth. His baton was raised. He waited, and began only after the cannons had stopped. There was something very significant in this, something symbolic. It was as if all of us—including Prokofiev—had reached some kind of shared turning point.

The premiere of the Fifth Symphony was a magnificent triumph for Prokofiev. However, it proved to be his final appearance as a conductor. A few days after the concert, Prokofiev became dizzy, the result of hypertension. Prokofiev fell and suffered a brain concussion. Although he would live another eight years, Prokofiev's health would never be the same. With those tragic events in mind, the optimism expressed in the Prokofiev Fifth—"a symphony of the greatness of the human spirit, a song of praise of free and happy mankind"—perhaps becomes all the more poignant.

The Fifth Symphony is in four movements. The first (*Andante*), featuring the introduction, development and recapitulation of thematic material, opens and closes with a theme first presented by the flutes and bassoon. The second movement (*Allegro marcato*), in contrast to the first, is a playful scherzo. The slow movement (*Adagio*) builds to a sustained, violent outburst before finally yielding to the tranquil closing measures. The final movement (*Allegro giocoso*) opens with a subdued introductory passage. But the violas soon launch the energetic principal portion of the finale, which resolves to a conclusion of irrepressible animation and vigor.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two

clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, piano, percussion, and strings.

Duration: ca. 46 minutes