



AMERICAN CLASSICS



SAMUEL BARBER

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Essays for Orchestra Nos. 2 and 3

Karina Gauvin • Thomas Trotter

Royal Scottish National Orchestra • Marin Alsop



Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 · Toccata Festiva

The music of Samuel Barber has always managed to elude critics and scholars, largely because he was never part of a particular school, aesthetic, or dogma in the midst of a tumultuous century where composers defined themselves by artistic camps. The reductive term “neo-romantic” is conveniently attached to Barber’s work, yet there was nothing “neo” about him—rather, Barber was the last of the true romantics, an American equivalent to Sibelius or Elgar, but with a richer craft, a craggier surface to his work, and a more curious, far-reaching mind.

Barber was born in Westchester, Pennsylvania in March 1910, and showed great promise from an early age, composing some rather impressive, large-scale pieces under the tutelage of composer Sidney Homer, who doubled as his uncle. In 1924 he entered the Curtis Institute as a member of its first class, where he not only studied composition and piano, but also became quite a good baritone. So impressive was he that his fellow students, in awe of his prodigious talent and keen intellect, spoke without irony of the three “B’s”, “Bach, Beethoven, and Barber.”

Barber would go on to be one of the most feted composers of his day, winning two Pulitzer Prizes and the Prix de Rome, and receiving commissions from the world’s most established musical institutions, most notably the Metropolitan Opera, but the failure of his second opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*, eventually curtailed his otherwise prolific output. In the end, watching post-Weberian composers like Boulez and Carter rise to prominence, observing his own evolving obsolescence, made him into a somewhat reclusive, tragic figure. He died in January 1981 in New York City.

In 1942, Barber was commissioned by Bruno Walter to compose a work for the New York Philharmonic, and he obliged with his *Second Essay for Orchestra*, widely regarded as the tightest, most incisive of the three compositions bearing this title. Some even consider it a single-movement symphony

more than an essay, since it is densely packed, and more happens in its scant ten minutes than in some works which sprawl for half an hour. The music itself is all based on the opening flute motif, a sort of quiet fanfare, which eases into the second theme, a more sparse, stark idea in contrast to the lyrical opening. Eventually, Barber spins the initial idea into a spry fugue, and then, in a *tour de force*, combines all three ideas in a rousing finale, which culminates in a coda echoing the beginning - from his endings come his beginnings. It is Barber at his best, showing his flawless technical mechanism at its most sound, most musical.

A few years before his death, in 1976, Barber discussed the possibility of a commission for a large-scale orchestral work with Eugene Ormandy, then music director for the Philadelphia Orchestra. This became his *Third Essay for Orchestra*, a form Barber himself had invented several decades earlier. The piece has a large orchestral sweep but is cast in a single, unbroken, tightly wrought movement (all of the material is generated from the opening percussion figure). It is not without lyrical moments, but ultimately it is less melodic than the other two *Essays*, both composed over thirty years before.

It is little wonder that Barber took to the lyrical prose-poetry of James Agee, whose lilting, nostalgic words the composer would convert into one of his most beloved works, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. The words evoke quieter, plaintive, more innocent times, and composed, as it was, two years after World War II had come to its horrifying close, everyone in the Western world sought refuge in the idea of less violent, more optimistic times. Behind the pure sparsity of the musical textures, however, lurks a darker threat, the potential for shattered innocence, and it comes as no surprise to learn that while Barber was writing this piece, his father, to whom *Knoxville* is dedicated, was slowly dying. The work is scored for soprano and string quintet, with harp, flute and clarinet, and Barber manages a piece which wonderfully balances the largeness of orchestral writing

with the intimacy of chamber music: the composer himself described the work as a “lyric rhapsody”. It was commissioned and first performed by his friend and long-time champion Eleanor Steber, and the première was in April 1948 under the baton of Serge Koussevitzky leading the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

In 1960, when the wealthy musical patron Mary Zimbalist offered to pay for a new pipe organ in Philadelphia, the offer came, to the double delight of Eugene Ormandy, with a commission for Barber to write a piece initiating the new instrument. For this occasion he made the *Tocatta Festiva*, a work scored

for solo organ with a mid-sized orchestra and designed to display the full range of technical possibilities of the recent, much appreciated gift. Using the orchestra not as an accompanying force, but to create a sort of hyper-organ, the piece is a true star-turn for the player, including a fast, furious opening fanfare, and a cadenza, a soloist’s moment for virtuosic display, using only the pedals, a feat which baffles even the most accomplished of performers.

Daniel Felsenfeld

Karina Gauvin

Karina Gauvin's unique voice, remarkable technique, and accomplished musicianship have charmed audiences worldwide from the Royal Opera House in London to the prestigious 92nd Street Y and the Lincoln Center in New York. Her vast repertoire covers music from Johann Sebastian Bach to Benjamin Britten and Luciano Berio. She has sung with many major orchestras including the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, the Toronto Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, I Musici de Montréal, the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Les Talens Lyriques, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra, the Seattle Symphony, Capriccio Stravagante and Les Violons du Roy. On the operatic or concert stage, she has delivered outstanding performances with conductors as diverse as Charles Dutoit, Christopher Hogwood, Helmuth Rilling, Bruno Weil, Markus Creed, Bernard Labadie, Andrew Parrot and Christophe Rousset. Active as a recitalist, she has collaborated with several chamber music ensembles and with pianists Marc-André Hamelin, Michael McMahon and Roger Vignoles. Her outstanding performances have been recognised in prestigious competitions worldwide. They include the Lieder Prize and the Public's Prize at the 's-Hertogenbosch International Vocal Competition and First Prize of the CBC Radio National Competition. Her awards include the Virginia Parker Prize, and the Maggie Teyte Memorial Prize in London. In 1996 she was chosen Soloist of the Year by the International French Public Radio Community and in 2000 she was given an Opus Award as performer of the year. Her acclaimed recordings range from Handel and Vivaldi to French art song. A graduate of the Montreal Conservatory of Music, Karina Gauvin studied with Marie Daveluy.

Thomas Trotter

Thomas Trotter is one of Britain's most widely admired musicians. In May 2002 he received the Royal Philharmonic Society's prestigious Instrumentalist Award in recognition of his particular achievements in 2001, cited as one of the foremost exponents of the organist's art. The excellence of his musicianship has also long been recognised internationally in his musical partnerships. He performs as soloist with, amongst many others, the conductors Sir Simon Rattle, Bernard Haitink, Riccardo Chailly and Sir Charles Mackerras. He has performed recitals in Berlin's Philharmonie, the Gewandhaus in Leipzig, both the Musikverein and the Konzerthaus in Vienna and London's Royal Festival Hall. He has given the opening recital on new or restored organs in places such as Cleveland's Severance Hall (Ohio), Princeton University Chapel (New Jersey), the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and St David's Hall in Cardiff and he is regularly asked to perform on major historic instruments such as those at St Ouen in Rouen, St Bavo's in Haarlem (Netherlands), Weingarten Abbey in Germany and Woolsey Hall at Yale University. He has appeared at the festivals of Salzburg, Berlin, Vienna, Edinburgh and London's BBC Proms, and performs with leading orchestras such as the Vienna Philharmonic, Berlin Philharmonic, London Philharmonic and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras. He made his first American appearance with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in 1987. Thomas Trotter's career is also firmly founded on his relationship with the City of Birmingham in England. Here he was appointed City Organist in 1983, in succession to Sir George Thalben-Ball, and he is now also Resident Organist of the magnificent new Klais organ at Symphony Hall in the city, where he gave the opening recital in October 2001. He is also Organist at St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey, in London and visiting Professor of Organ at the Royal College of Music, also in London. Earlier in his career he was an organ scholar at King's College, Cambridge, and he later continued his studies with Marie-Claire Alain in Paris where he took the Prix de Virtuosit  in her class. He won First Prize at the St Albans International Organ Competition in 1979 and made his d but in London's Royal Festival Hall the following year. In addition to his weekly recitals in

Birmingham, Thomas Trotter regularly performs throughout the United States and Europe. He is an active recording artist and of his several recordings, releases of Messiaen and Mozart have been named Critics' Choice in *Gramophone* magazine. He received a Grand Prix du Disque for his recording of music by Liszt in 1995.

Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra, in 1951 the now full-time ensemble took the name of the Scottish National Orchestra, later assuming the title Royal in recognition of its importance in the musical life of Scotland. Distinguished conductors who have worked with the orchestra include Sir John Barbirolli, Karl Rankl, Hans Swarowsky, Walter Susskind, Sir Alexander Gibson, the first Scottish-born Principal Conductor, Bryden Thomson and Neeme Järvi. Walter Weller, now Conductor Emeritus, served as Music Director and Principal Conductor from 1992 to 1997, when he was succeeded by Alexander Lazarev. As well as recording a series for Naxos devoted to the orchestral music of Samuel Barber with recent Principal Guest Conductor Marin Alsop, the orchestra also made an important contribution to the authoritative Naxos series of Bruckner Symphonies under the late Georg Tintner, and has added significantly to the stock of recordings of film music, with award-winning releases in London and in Germany. A busy schedule in Scotland brings regular seasons in its home-town of Glasgow, annual appearances at the Edinburgh Festival and regular performances at the BBC Promenade Concerts in London. In addition to concerts in England, the orchestra has travelled to other countries, with tours of North America and Japan, and throughout Europe. In 2002 the orchestra was given a Classic FM 'Red F' award for its outstanding contribution to classical music, through recording, performance, education and outreach work.

Marin Alsop

Principal Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra since Autumn 2002, Marin Alsop won the Royal Philharmonic Society Conductor of 2002 award. Following her Samuel Barber cycle with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra is a further series of recordings of works by Barber with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. Recent guest appearances have included the Chicago Symphony, New York Philharmonic, London Symphony and London Philharmonic, with further engagements with the Munich Philharmonic, Philadelphia and Los Angeles Orchestras. Marin Alsop studied at Yale and at the Juilliard School and won the Koussevitzky Prize at Tanglewood, where she was a pupil of Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa, and Gustav Meier. Marin Alsop's most recent recording for Naxos (8.559143) includes Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, *On the Town* and *On the Waterfront*.

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 **words 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 in 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; bellling 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 are 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 the 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 be. 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, no, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.

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Playing
Time:
56:55

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NAXOS

Samuel BARBER

(1910-1981)

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| 1 | Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op. 24 * | 16:51 |
| 2 | Second Essay for Orchestra, Op. 17 | 11:12 |
| 3 | Third Essay for Orchestra, Op. 47 | 14:28 |
| 4 | Toccatà Festiva, Op. 36 § | 14:24 |

Karina Gauvin, Soprano *
Thomas Trotter, Organ §
Royal Scottish National Orchestra
Marin Alsop

Recorded at Henry Wood Hall, Glasgow, on 27th October, 2002 (1),
3rd May 1999 (2) and 18th March 2001 (3),
and at Paisley Abbey, Glasgow on 11th June, 2002 (4).

Producers: Andrew Walton - K&A Productions Ltd. (1-2),
Peter Newble (3) and Tim Handley (4) • Engineers: Mike Clements (1),
Tony Faulkner (2), Ben Connellan (3) and Tim Handley (4)
Post-production: Peter Newble and Andrew Walton (1-3)

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American flag, folk artist, 1880s



AMERICAN CLASSICS

This fifth instalment in 'Naxos's continuing and continuously revelatory series devoted to Barber's music' (*The Daily Telegraph*), conducted by *Gramophone Artist of the Year 2003* Marin Alsop, features the ripely romantic *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, a 'lyric rhapsody' for soprano and orchestra, and the rarely-recorded *Toccatà Festiva* for organ and orchestra which, with its fast, furious opening fanfare and virtuosic cadenza, is a veritable tour-de-force for the soloist.

Booklet notes in English
Sung text included

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