

Program notes by Jesse Holstein October 2010

At the height of the Romantic era, composers such as Liszt, Wagner, Mahler, Strauss, and Schoenberg had pushed the harmonic language of music to its limit with their emotionally charged chromaticism. In fact, Liszt, Wagner, and Schoenberg even saw possibilities that lay *beyond* the major/minor tonal system. As early as 1856, the iconic opening bars of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* envisaged a new harmonic order that was to come 52 years later. Indeed, with Schoenberg's *Drei Stucke* from 1908, the fetters of harmony came undone with the first examples of completely atonal music, much to the shock of audiences worldwide. Music would never be the same as this bold move opened up many new avenues of compositional thought and expanded the aesthetic palette of classical music beyond measure.

This year, thanks to an "American Masterpieces" grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Providence String Quartet will follow four pathways taken by four different composers. The earliest piece dates from 1896 and the latest from 1994. Each composer took a road less traveled, and for the genre of the string quartet, that has made all the difference.

Charles Ives: String Quartet No. 1 (1896)

One of music's most unusual figures, Charles Ives was not a composer by trade but was a very successful insurance man and would compose at night after work or on the commuter train to and from New York City. As a boy, he was raised on a steady diet of "Old Time Religion" revival hymns and by his bandmaster father's sonic experiments. George Ives, who led a crack army band during the Civil War, enjoyed placing musicians at the four corners of the town green in Danbury, Connecticut, and listening to the cross section of sound that resulted. He also reveled in the cacophony of different municipal bands marching in the same parade, each honking out a different tune. He even trained his son Charles to sing songs in different keys from his piano accompaniments, thus exposing the young Ives to one of his future trademarks, polytonality.

Charles became a salaried organist at the Danbury Baptist Church at the age of fourteen. He went on to study composition at Yale from 1894-1898 with a German trained teacher named Horatio Parker. Due to his father's influence and his own proclivity to experiment, Charles Ives butted heads with the rather conservative Parker and graduated from the hallowed university with a solid D+ average.

While he never completely abandoned traditional tonality and structure, lves always experimented with the possibilities of sound and in his first string quartet from 1896, lves would already employ some of his favorite devices that would become his calling cards in his mature style: musical quotation, polytonality, polyrhythm, and superimposing tunes atop one another á la the marching bands back in Danbury.

The regal first movement was originally written as a fugal exercise for professor Parker's class. The main source material for the first movement, as well as the remaining three movements, are revival hymns that he knew from his days at the Baptist church in Danbury and from the organ job he took at New Haven's Centre Church on the Green to help pay for tuition at Yale. "From Greenland's Icy Mountains," and "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" are the hymns used for the opening movement. The harmonies are handled with chorale-like voicing and the movement reaches a most triumphant climax and resolution.

The remaining three movements were written for actual liturgical use at the Centre Church, whose minister, Dr. Griggs, encouraged Ives' musical experimentation despite a few ruffled feathers from the congregation. Griggs told Ives, "Never you mind what the ladies' committee says, my

opinion is that God gets awfully tired of hearing the same thing over and over again." All three movements employ an ABA ternary form and are much more rhythmically and harmonically experimental than the first movement.

The upbeat allegro second movement uses the hymn "Beulah Land," and a brief snippet from "Bringing in the Sheaves" for its opening material, while the hymn "Shining Shore" is paraphrased for the contrasting B section. After the return to the opening material, Ives becomes increasingly rowdy and rambunctious in the coda before tying a bow on the movement with a gentle phrase from the chorus from "Beulah Land."

The first section of the contemplative third movement is a paraphrase from the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Lyricism is emphasized with long singing lines over richly voiced harmonies. The contrasting second section is centered on a theme derived from the same hymn, however atop pizzicato accompaniment, it has more of a waltz feel. As the second section develops, the sinewy lyricism is injected with sudden bursts of energy and propulsion, as if the lilting narrative wishes to break free and morph into a march. However, the foot is eased off of the throttle and the movement returns briefly to the meditative aesthetic of the opening material before arriving at a serene cadence.

The finale quotes the hymns "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name," and "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus," for the bustling first theme group. The contrasting lyrical section, with its falling motive in the first violin, is derived from "Shining Shore," which featured prominently in the second movement. For the movement's climax, Ives superimposes "Shining Shore," with its triple meter pulse, atop the four beat pattern of "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus." The glorious chaos that ensues surely would have made his father proud. The narrative eventually comes back together for a most rousing G major conclusion that must have settled the nerves of the congregation at the Centre Church after the fracas of the preceding section.

Samuel Barber: String Quartet, Opus 11 (1936)

The path chosen by Pennsylvania born Samuel Barber was one of unabashed conservatism. He believed that the musical language and palette of the Romantic era still had the potential to surprise and produce new ideas. While the intellectual school of composers who subscribed to Schoenberg's "serial" method of composing labeled Barber as an anachronistic fossil, he stayed true to his aesthetic vision and produced

many works that resonated with the public. One work, in particular, was elevated to iconic status when Barber was all of 28 years old.

The powerfully spiritual "Adagio for Strings" is familiar to most people even if they can't name the piece they are listening to. This emotional work premiered on an NBC radio broadcast on November 5, 1938 with Arturo Toscanini conducting. The work is thought to embody feelings of profound loss and grief. It was played at the funerals of Franklin Delanor Roosevelt and Albert Einstein; it was broadcast to the nation when John F. Kennedy was assassinated; and it was played by orchestras around the globe in the wake of the 9/11 tragedies. It has been featured on commercials and in soundtracks to motion pictures, most famously Oliver Stone's 1986 Vietnam War film, "Platoon." The works power is in its simplicity and depth of feeling. With its stepwise sinews of b-flat minor, woven together in a large dramatic arch, there are few works like the "Adagio" that have such direct access to people's emotions.

However, most people who *could* actually name Barber's "Adagio" from hearing it probably are not aware that the piece is an arrangement from the second movement of his string quartet from 1936. While some interpretations of the "Adagio" can sound positively Mahlerian in sound, Barber himself originally intended for the "Adagio" to be an intimate experience for string quartet. Additionally, as a middle movement, he intended there to be music before and after it. What about the rest of the piece? How did the quartet come about?

It seems that even a composer as distinguished, refined and erudite as Samuel Barber found humor in the old fashioned "poop joke." Ironically, a work that possesses the sublime "Adagio" had a rather scatological beginning! The quartet is first mentioned in a letter to the cellist Orlando Cole on May 6, 1936. Barber writes, "I have vague quartettish rumblings in my innards and need a bit of celestial Ex Lax to restore my equilibrium; there is nothing to do but get at it, and I will send the excrements to you by registered mail by August…."

This letter was written from Rome where the 26 year old Barber had just spent a year studying at the American Academy in the ancient city, thanks to a *Prix de Rome* prize he had received in the Spring of 1935. Barber was aware that Orlando Cole's quartet, the Curtis Quartet, was planning a European tour in the late months of 1936 and he wanted to write a quartet

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Bizarrely, he had applied for the award in the previous year with the submission of his Cello Sonata (written for Cole) and *Music for a Scene of Shelley* and was rejected. In the year that he won the prize, he submitted the same works to the same jury, only under the pseudonym of "John Brandywine!"

for them to play in Italy. Thanks to an extension of his traveling Pulitzer fellowship, he was able to remain in Europe for the summer and into the fall of 1936.² Barber, along with his colleague and partner Gian Carlo Menotti, lived in a cabin in the town of St. Wolfgang, Austria, for five months. It was a blissful summer of solitude for the two young composers and they were able to work uninterrupted. "We are very inaccessible and able to work in peace…" Barber would write to Cole on July 15. It was in this cabin in St. Wolfgang where the majority of the quartet was composed.

The first and second movements were put down on paper without much strain from the young composer. In a letter to Cole from the late summer, Barber was feeling quite optimistic about the quartet's middle movement. As biographer Barbara Heyman points out in her seminal biography of Barber, "On 19 September, with uncanny prescience about a work that in its orchestral arrangement would be considered one of the sublime masterpieces of the twentieth century, Barber announced to Cole, 'I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout! Now for a finale."

For most composers, the seemingly harmless four words, "now for a finale" have proven to be easier said than done. It seems that if your name is Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or Boulez, you have struggled at some point in wrapping up your piece with an effective finale. Barber was certainly no exception and the final movement of his quartet proved to be a thorn in his side for years. Even with the quartet going swimmingly in mid-summer, Barber knew that the quartet would not be ready for the Curtis Quartet's tour of Europe. In a letter to Cole on the last day of August 1936, Barber wrote to Cole, "It is coming along slowly, but will not be ready in time. The best thing will probably be for me to have it tried out by the Rome quartet in rehearsal, and then I can send it over to you from Rome."

Undoubtedly, Barber was disappointed that his friends, the Curtis Quartet, were not going to be able to premiere the new quartet. Felix Lamond, the head of Composition at the American Academy in Rome, had already engaged the Belgian Pro Arte Quartet for the job. This did not please

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² In fact, at 26 Barber was already a well-decorated composer. He had won the Bearns Prize from Columbia University in 1929 for his Violin Sonata, and again in 1933 for his Overture to *The School for Scandal*. He received a Pulitzer fellowship in 1935 and his compositions began to be published by G. Schirmer, Inc. that same year, beginning with his youthful op. 2 songs, "The Daisies," "With rue my heart is laden," and "Bessie Bobtail." His compositions were being played by orchestras like the New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra and even heard on national radio broadcasts. Barber was a major player in the new school of American composers along with young mavericks like Roy Harris, Roger Sessions, William Schumann and Aaron Copland. However, among them Barber was unique in that he would never leave the sound world of the Romantic era.

Barber as he had recently heard a recording of the Schubert Cello Quintet with the Pro Arte and he found it very unsatisfactory. The premiere went ahead on December 14 in Rome at the Villa Aurelia, one day after the premiere of his First Symphony also in Rome by the Philharmonic Augusteo Orchestra. He *had* finished the final movement in time for the premiere but was dissatisfied and retracted it for revision immediately following the performance.

A trip back to the United States from January 15 to April 24, 1937 for the American premiere of his 1st Symphony with the Cleveland Orchestra under Artur Rodzinsky put the revisions on hold. For years, the third movement continued to be a peccadillo for Barber. After an important performance at the Library of Congress on April 20, 1937 by the Gordon Quartet and several performances from the Curtis Quartet around America, Barber finally gave up and scrapped the final movement all together. Very telling is a review by Howard Taubman of *The New York Times* from a performance by the Curtis Quartet in Town Hall on March 15, 1938. Taubman felt that the first movement showed "virility and dramatic impact" and the second movement was, "the finest of the work, deeply felt and written with economy, resourcefulness and distinction." The last movement did not receive such praise, being in Taubman's words, "a scrappy working out of unexciting ideas...."

The Quartet's finale ended up being a cut-and-paste job. Barber literally cut the ending from the first movement and pasted it as a postscript to the second movement. Actually, the Quartet in its ultimate form does not possess a finale *per se*. The original ending to the first movement is to be played *attaca* after the second movement. In sense, the quartet is a lopsided palindrome. The premiere of the quartet in its final form was given by the Budapest Quartet at the Library of Congress in January of 1943.

The Providence String Quartet has received permission from the Curtis Institute of Music and Barber's publisher, G. Schirmer, to perform the original finale.

Steve Reich "Different Trains" (1988)

Another path for 20th century composers was developed in the artsy undergrounds of San Francisco and New York in the 1960s before being accepted, albeit with mixed reactions, into the world's concert halls. With its short kernels of music, repeated over and over with gradual transformation and development, the genre of "Minimalism" became

popular with the public because of its immediacy of expression and Zen like clarity. One can just chill out, listen, and be drawn in by the trance-like repetition. One of the pioneers of the movement is Steve Reich, whose powerful "Different Trains" for string quartet and tape instantly became a modern masterpiece after its premiere by the Kronos Quartet in 1988.

Born in New York City in 1936, Steve Reich spent his childhood split between Los Angeles and New York as his parents divorced when he was one. He would travel back and forth by train accompanied by a governess. Years later, Reich had the realization that had he been born in Europe, as a Jew he would have been forced to ride on very different kinds of trains. This was the catalyst for "Different Trains," and for source material Reich used interviews with his childhood governess, a train porter that worked the trans-American routes at the time of the war and three Holocaust survivors. The survivors' reminiscences about the war also included recollections about their own journeys on trains to concentration camps.

Like the Bohemian composer Leoš Janáček had done almost a hundred years earlier in his works, Reich used the melodic inflection of his subject's voices as the principle themes of "Different Trains." Throughout the work, men's voices are represented by themes in the cello, and women's voices by themes in the viola. The sounds of trains features prominently as well; not only in the pre-recorded tape with the click-clack of the locomotive, the piercing whistle and the clang of the bell, but in the string quartet itself, with repetitive sixteenth note motives that recreate the forward propulsion of the train.

The first movement of the historically programmatic quartet takes place before the War and Reich uses the recollections of the governess and train porter as the narrative. The music drives forward at a busy clip, recreating Reich's cross-country journeys. There is a palpable shift in emotion at the transition to the second movement. The somberly paced Holocaust train replaces the bustle and optimism of the American train, and the strident American train whistles are taken over by the sound of air-raid sirens. The source material for the second movement is the chilling recollections of the Holocaust survivors.

There is another startling shift from the second to the third movement as the noise of the trains, whistles and air-raid sirens finally stop, and there is a brief but incredibly loud silence. Out of this silence comes a concentrated sixteenth note cell that is developed fugally before we hear the derivation of the melodic kernel: the reminiscence of a Hungarian named Paul saying, "And the war was over." In the work's final movement, we hear the

governess and the porter, as well as the survivors trying to move on with their lives and make sense of the horrors that had transpired.

Osvaldo Golijov: "The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind" (1994)

The final work that the Providence Quartet will explore as part of the "American Masters" grant comes from the unique voice of the Argentinean born, Osvaldo Golijov. Born in La Plata in 1960, his style was created by the convergence of several different genres. Born to a piano teacher mother and a physician father, themselves émigrés from Russia, he grew up engulfed in liturgical Jewish and secular Klezmer styles of music, traditional Western chamber music, and of course being an Argentine, the passion of the Tango and its master, Astor Piazolla. It is at the cross-section of these styles that Golijov's voice was born.

Inspired by the Argentinean-Jewish clarinetist Giora Feidman, a great exponent of both classical and klezmer styles of playing, of "The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind" Golijov himself writes, "I have attempted here to integrate two strong musical traditions into a single world." The title of the work, written for clarinet and string quartet, refers to a rabbi who lived in France from 1160-1235 A.D.

Here are thoughts from the Boston based composer himself about this work (presented here with permission from Boosey & Hawkes):

"Eight centuries ago Isaac The Blind, the great kabbalist rabbi of Provence, dictated a manuscript in which he asserted that all things and events in the universe are product of combinations of the Hebrew alphabet's letters: 'Their root is in a name, for the letters are like branches, which appear in the manner of flickering flames, mobile, and nevertheless linked to the coal'. His conviction still resonates today: don't we have scientists who believe that the clue to our life and fate is hidden in other codes?

"Isaac's lifelong devotion to his art is as striking as that of string quartets and klezmer musicians. In their search for something that arises from tangible elements but transcends them, they are all reaching a state of communion. Gershom Scholem, the preeminent scholar of Jewish mysticism, says that 'Isaac and his disciples do not speak of ecstasy, of a unique act of stepping outside oneself in which human consciousness abolishes itself. *Debhequth* (communion) is a constant state, nurtured and renewed through meditation'. If communion is not the reason, how else would one explain the strange life that Isaac led, or the decades during

which groups of four souls dissolve their individuality into single, higher organisms, called string quartets? How would one explain the chain of klezmer generations that, while blessing births, weddings, and burials, were trying to discover the melody that could be set free from itself and become only air, spirit, *ruakh*?

"The movements of this work sound to me as if written in three of the different languages spoken by the Jewish people throughout our history. This somehow reflects the composition's epic nature. I hear the prelude and the first movement, the most ancient, in Arameic; the second movement is in Yiddish, the rich and fragile language of a long exile; the third movement and postlude are in sacred Hebrew.

"The prelude and the first movement simultaneously explore two prayers in different ways: The quartet plays the first part of the central prayer of the High Holidays, 'We will observe the mighty holiness of this day...', while the clarinet dreams the motifs from 'Our Father, Our King'. The second movement is based on 'The Old Klezmer Band', a traditional dance tune, which is surrounded here by contrasting manifestations of its own halo. The third movement was written before all the others. It is an instrumental version of K'Vakarat, a work that I wrote a few years ago for Kronos and Cantor Misha Alexandrovich. The meaning of the word *klezmer*: instrument of song, becomes clear when one hears David Krakauer's interpretation of the cantor's line. This movement, together with the postlude, bring to conclusion the prayer left open in the first movement: '...Thou pass and record, count and visit, every living soul, appointing the measure of every creature's life and decreeing its destiny'.

"But blindness is as important in this work as dreaming and praying. I had always the intuition that, in order to achieve the highest possible intensity in a performance, musicians should play, metaphorically speaking, 'blind'. That is why, I think, all legendary bards in cultures around the world, starting with Homer, are said to be blind. 'Blindness' is probably the secret of great string quartets, those who don't need their eyes to communicate among them, with the music, or the audience. My homage to all of them and Isaac of Provence is this work for blind musicians, so they can play it by heart. Blindness, then, reminded me of how to compose music as it was in the beginning: An art that springs from and relies on our ability to sing and hear, with the power to build castles of sound in our memories."