

Program Notes for *Notes from America* February 16 2008

American music came to world attention in the twentieth century. One can effectively argue that all realms of music making, both in classical and popular form, found their true and expressive voice during these singularly notable years. Laurier himself declared that the twentieth century would belong to Canada, but it might have been more accurate, in hindsight, to broaden that prediction to include all of the Americas. This was a time when many nations of our hemisphere came of age, and became independent contributors to the global community.

Lost in the enormity, the triumphs and the tragedies, of world events during this time, is the development of equally independent musical cultures. Countries in North, South, and Central America have shared their musical heritage with the world, through the voices of countless talented composers and performers. Tonight, we feature three of the giants of American musical composition, each uniquely faithful to his culture, and that of his great country.

Aaron Copland was born in Brooklyn in 1900. His parents had emigrated from Lithuania, by way of Scotland. From an early age (with neither the encouragement nor discouragement of his family), Copland was drawn to music and aspired to be a composer. He was fortunate to have the opportunities to work with both Rubin Goldmark (who also taught George Gershwin), and Nadia Boulanger (who taught just about everybody) in New York and Paris respectively, in the 1920's. He was later very influenced by the music of Igor Stravinsky, but remained, through his association with Boulanger, very much enamoured of the French impressionists, Debussy and Ravel. All these influences are heard in his music, which is very wide-ranging in style and scope.

We hear tonight his a cappella motet *In the beginning*, composed in 1947. It is, as the title suggests, a musical account of the creation story as it appears in the biblical book of Genesis. It is scored for mezzo-soprano solo (as story-teller) and mixed chorus. The musical language is accessible, but commanding at times. The various created things – light and darkness, heaven and earth, water and land, flora and fauna, and lastly, human beings – are most evocatively and expressively presented in the continuous dialogue between soloist and choir. The work ends just as exuberantly as it begins mysteriously, and is one of the great monuments in the annals of choral literature.

The *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* were composed in 1950. Copland himself said, that “there is something about music that keeps its distance even at the moment that it engulfs us. It is at the same time outside and away from us and inside and part of us.” He went on to observe that the same thing could be said of Dickinson's poetry. Dickinson (1830-86) lived most of her life in almost total isolation from the outside world, communicating with her few friends only in writing. She was absolutely absorbed in the subjects of nature, death, life, and eternity, and her work is at once reflective of her loneliness and state of want, but at the same time it offers intimate evidence of inspiration

and happiness. Copland wrote that he fell in love at first with *The Chariot*, to the point that he thought about it and recited it in his mind constantly. He later added the other eleven songs, and each is dedicated to a colleague or student, among them Alberto Ginastera and Elliot Carter.

Samuel Barber (1910-81) was a prolific writer of songs, chamber and orchestral music, and choral works, and his output includes no fewer than three operas. He is most widely known for his *Adagio for Strings*, the slow movement of his *String Quartet* of 1936. He transcribed the work for choral forces, set to the penitential Latin text *Agnus Dei* in 1967. The work evokes the sense of drama and pathos that is a feature of many of his compositions, and is probably one of the best-known and loved pieces of music to have come from the United States, appearing in many films and other forms of media.

Leonard Bernstein was born in 1918 in Massachusetts. After attending Harvard University and the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied conducting, composition, and piano, he moved to New York and became Assistant Conductor of the New York Philharmonic, rising to Music Director in 1957. His compositions are numerous and have enjoyed massive appeal, both on the concert and opera stage, and in the world of musical theatre. He was a life-long friend of Copland, and became known as the most gifted interpreter of the latter's music.

Bernstein was commissioned to write *Chichester Psalms* for the 900th anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Chichester in 1965. The work is formed in three movements, each with a singular sentiment. The first is a setting of a portion of Psalm 108 "Awake, psaltery and harp", and Psalm 100 "O be joyful in the Lord, all you lands" in its entirety. The second, a reflective setting of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd", with a portion of Psalm 2 "Why do the nations rage?" inserted to great musical and theological effect. It also features an achingly beautiful treble solo, which the composer stipulated music be sung by a boy. The third movement begins with a dissonant instrumental prelude, based on the opening bars of the work, before settling into a peaceful and melodic setting of Psalm 131, "Lord, I am not high-minded ... and have quieted myself". Finally, there is an epilogue and recapitulation of sorts in the last four phrases of music, where we here a portion of Psalm 133 "How good and pleasant it is for people to dwell together in unity".

This last statement is a sentiment that is timeless, as well for our generation as all those that came before us.

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