

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

American Masters

January 30, 2004 - Town Hall Seattle

January 31, 2004 - Rialto Theater Tacoma

Barber: Adagio

Mendoza: Turn-out

Gershwin: Lullaby

Ellington: Sophisticated Lady, Solitude

Copland: Music for the Theater

Program Notes by Ron Drummond

The single most famous orchestral work of the 20th Century is almost certainly the *Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Barber (1910-1981). Even the film-scores of John Williams have likely not reached the level of cultural saturation achieved by the *Adagio*. Long before the Barber score started appearing in dozens of movies and television commercials, its fame had been secured.

By the time he was 26, Barber was widely considered to be the finest young composer in America. He'd won numerous awards for his music, starting with Columbia University's Bearn's Award for the violin sonata he wrote at age 18. Pulitzer Travelling Scholarships allowed him to travel in Europe in 1935 and again in 1936, the year he won the coveted Prix de Rome. During his residency at the American Academy in Rome, Barber wrote the String Quartet, Opus 11, which includes the original version of the *Adagio*. Lovers of the work who have not heard the quartet as a whole are urged to seek it out - the framing movements are aggressive, thorny, highly rhythmic, often dissonant, and serve to intensify the endless flowing beauties of the *Adagio*, an effect worthy of the late Beethoven quartets that Barber pays homage to.

Two years after the quartet's Roman premiere, back in the States Barber decided to arrange the slow movement for string orchestra, not suspecting the result. Arturo Toscanini first performed the *Adagio for Strings* with the NBC Symphony Orchestra on 5 November 1938, in a radio broadcast that reached millions of people all across America. A recording soon followed (the movement's ten-minute duration was ideal for one side of a 78 r.p.m. record), and Toscanini made the work a staple of his repertoire, performing it at festivals and concerts throughout America and Europe. It became and remained Barber's most popular piece. Just how popular is shown by the fact that it was played at the funeral of Franklin D. Roosevelt - and, almost twenty years later, at the funeral of JFK. Since then, it has appeared on the soundtracks of films like *El Norte*, *The Elephant Man*, and *Platoon*, not to mention countless TV shows and commercials. Yet, unlike most music we hear too much, it never quite seems to grow old. There's something inexhaustible about that sinuously unfolding melody, so like a river, a river that carries our soulful valedictions home.

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"Did you play anything as a kid?" an interviewer once asked George Gershwin (1898-1937), the composer of *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*. "Only hooky," he replied.

Growing up in Brooklyn, the child of Russian-Jewish immigrants, George was into rollerskating and street sports, not music. Then one day when he was 11, he heard the sounds of Schumann's *Humoresque* wafting from the school auditorium; enchanted, he followed the music to its source, and met Max Rosen, a boy his own age who later became famous as a violinist. Their friendship fueled George's new-found love for music, so much so that when his parents bought a stand-up piano the following year, ostensibly for his older brother

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Ira, it was George who sat down and wowed them by playing the latest popular song from memory. He'd learned it by making a game out of chasing the rippling keys on a friend's player piano with his fingers!

From his teens on, Gershwin was a veritable fountain of melody. He dropped out of high school in 1914 to go to work in Tin Pan Alley (the business district in Manhattan that was the center of the popular songwriting and music publishing industry), first as a "piano pounder" - a demonstrator of the music in a publisher's catalog - and eventually as a staff songwriter at various firms. On the road to fame and fortune, 1919, the year he turned 21, was a watershed: he wrote his first musical, *La La Lucille*, and "Swanee", the song Al Jolson made famous and Gershwin's first big success. It was also the year he wrote "Lullaby".

Originally written for piano, Gershwin transcribed "Lullaby" for string quartet as an exercise for his orchestration teacher. Handwritten copies made the rounds of musician friends and became popular at quartet-reading parties for a season, and Gershwin later reused the melody in his one-act opera, *Blue Monday*. The quartet version was only published in 1968. Though the basic melody is simple, Gershwin wraps it in a lush blanket of strings, accents it with ethereal harmonics, and carries it on a walking pizzicato bass line. The melody's every repetition features a different setting. Finally, a lovely cello solo interlude leads back to the full group, which plays this Jazz Age lullaby one last time before allowing it to evaporate into string harmonics and fade away.

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Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899-1974) was without a doubt the greatest jazz composer of the first half of the 20th Century, and quite possibly of the century as a whole. As composer, pianist, arranger, and band leader, he had an uncanny knack for combining instrumental sonorities and timbres to often startling, and startlingly apt, effect; for widely varying those combinations; for creating superb accompaniments for improvisation and for integrating solos so that they fit smoothly into the larger structure of a work while contributing to the development of that structure; and most importantly for bringing out the very best in his players. During a fifty-year career, Ellington may have written as many as 6,000 compositions, ranging from three-minute instrumentals and popular songs to large-scale suites, incidental music for plays, musical comedies, over 50 film scores, sacred choral works, a ballet, and even an opera.

"Sophisticated Lady" (1932) was written at the end of Ellington's five-year stand at the Cotton Club in Harlem, and he soon took her, and his now-famous band, on the road, performing in various American cities and touring Europe to boot. Along with "Solitude" (1934), "Sophisticated Lady" remains among the Duke's most popular works, recorded countless times in dozens of arrangements, including the orchestral arrangements we proudly present tonight.

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Best known for perennial favorites like *Fanfare for the Common Man* and *Appalachian Spring*, Aaron Copland (1900-1990) is quite possibly *the* quintessentially American composer. Yet in order to find his uniquely American voice, Copland had to live and study in Paris for several years.

Like Gershwin, Copland was born and raised in Brooklyn of Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. Though he studied piano from his early teens, it was his attendance at New York Symphony concerts, where he saw performances by Paderewski and Cyril Scott, and the Diaghilev Ballet in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune*, that inspired Copland to become a composer. In his late teens he studied harmony and counterpoint with composer Karl Goldmark, whose conservatism served to sharpen Copland's love for modern composers like Mussorgsky, Ravel, and Scriabin.

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Having scrimped enough from allowances and summer jobs, Copland sailed for Paris in the summer of 1921, where he became the first American to be accepted as a composition student by Nadia Boulanger, the most famous music teacher in Europe. Copland studied with her for three years; during that time he wrote his first large-scale work, *Grohg* - music for an imaginary ballet. He met Roussel, Milhaud, and Prokofiev, and attended important premieres. Summers in Vienna, Berlin, and Salzburg brought him in touch with the music of Webern, Bartok, and Hindemith, among many others. During these years American jazz was becoming hugely popular throughout Europe, and for the first time Copland took a serious interest in it. This, together with his growing love for the music of Mussorgsky and Stravinsky, which was so thoroughly Russian in character, made him keen to develop a style that was uniquely American.

Soon after returning to the United States, Copland decided to try his hand at creating his own brand of symphonic jazz. One result was *Music for the Theater* (1925), a suite in five parts for small orchestra, which makes use of syncopated and polymetric rhythms, and "blue" intervals. Copland had no particular play in mind for his work; rather, his music was intended to evoke the variety of moods found in many plays of the day, the romantic or contemplative interlude, the dance-like burst of excited activity, even a parody of burlesque. Brightened with trumpets, trombone, and clarinet, the music evokes jazz and popular song while remaining distinctively Copland's: listen for the sudden changes in metre, the irregular time signatures, the way the spaces inside the music can fill up or empty out in a heartbeat. And the relaxed lyricism of the Prologue, Interlude, and Epilogue is already uniquely his own; what's more, it's uniquely American. Not bad for a 24-year-old.