



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 1 – A Time to Honor

October 16, 2021

Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman No. 1 — Joan Tower

Tower, of course, is one of America's most recognized and honored composers, having contributed a wealth of significant compositions primarily for orchestra, including several solo concertos, and chamber ensembles. While the composer of an impressive number of significant works, ironically, perhaps the public thinks of her most for her six fanfares entitled, *Fanfares for the Common Woman*. The somewhat cheeky reference to Aaron Copland's beloved composition is pellucidly clear. Four of her fanfares are scored for brass ensemble, some with percussion, and two are written for full orchestra. She composed the first in 1986 and the last in 2016 and they are collectively dedicated to "women who take risks and are adventurous."

Each of the six fanfares is dedicated to one woman of merit, with the first fanfare recognizing the well-known conductor, Marin Alsop. The Houston Symphony commissioned the work and gave its première in 1987. The instrumentation of Tower's work is the same as Copland's, but adds additional percussion instruments. Like Copland's fanfare, Tower's begins with a monstrous percussion explosion, but eschewing his ponderous tempo, Tower's work moves right out in a somewhat brisker tempo. Twittering motifs in the trumpets and gestures in the low brass that seem to evoke something of Copland yield to dense layers of distinct material in the various instruments. Driving rhythms seem to collapse into thick, dissonant tone clusters as the riotous texture grows. The "layers" of contrasting fanfare-like figures seem to cascade all over each other as they gallop along in growing intensity. An allusion to the opening "twitters" briefly surfaces before the smashing end.

Entr'act — Caroline Shaw

Shaw gained instant recognition early in her career by becoming the youngest recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in Music, at the age of thirty in 2013. That work, *Partita for 8 Voices*, is an astonishing *a capella* choral work that pushed familiar conventional boundaries for choral music. It employed a variety of unusual vocal sounds and techniques "uniquely embracing speech, whispers, sighs, murmurs, wordless melodies, and novel vocal effects." Her compositions often incorporate any number of sly references to harmonies, rhythms, textures, dances, and other historical elements—but subtly, and often almost imperceptibly. In the course of a single work you may experience a sense of a Baroque dance, romantic harmonic allusions, the most avant-garde instrumental techniques, and perhaps dissonant sonorities and harmonic clusters on the cutting edge. But all coordinated and integrated in a nuanced way. Her cheerful personal mien is reflected in an advanced style that is rarely unattractive or cold.

Her versatile musical tastes have led her to an astonishing eclecticism in her collaborations, including with the controversial rapper Kanye West.

Entr'act was originally written for string quartet in 2011, and later adapted for string orchestra. Apparently inspired by hearing a performance of Haydn's String Quartet, op. 77, no. 2, the work takes something of Haydn's surprise move in the trio of the minuet. The composer says that she enjoys how some music "...suddenly takes you to the other side of Alice's looking glass, in a kind of absurd, subtle, Technicolor transition." That you will hear in *Entr'act*.

It's an unusual work, blending together artfully disparate musical ideas. It begins pensively with lush, rich gestures whose unified rhythms invoke nothing so strongly as that of a stately baroque dance, the *sarabande*. Its elegance and dark serenity is worthy of a Handel aria. The series of short sonorous invocations soon are extended with a kind of "trailing off" with dissonant dissolutions from an entirely different musical universe. But, we also hear an intimation of the very traditional harmonic "circle of fifths." There soon follows a faster, graceful dance section, played pizzicato, in an almost romantic tripping rhythm. The musical kaleidoscope continues to what seems to invoke Bartok's "night music," moving faster, still with some implied Baroque harmonies and well, as, of all things, seeming *bariolage* (a Baroque violin technique).

The traditional is soon cast aside for screeches and chaos that are reminiscent of the avant-garde composer, Ligeti--perhaps remembered from the film *2001*. It ends with a return of variants of the opening material that dissipate into the stratosphere. A solo violoncello, in a traditional guitar-like texture and with vaguely tonal elements quietly ends this unique work.

***A Time to Vote* — Gwyneth Walker**

Walker, born in 1947, grew up in New Canaan, Connecticut. She attended Brown University and the Hartt School of Music, ultimately receiving a DMA in music composition. She taught for fourteen years, ending her academic career at Oberlin College Conservatory. After which she moved to a dairy farm in Vermont, where she now resides as an independent composer. While she has composed many songs and choral works, there are some instrumental chamber works, orchestra works, and two concertos for violin and orchestra. Texts with personal and emotional meaning are an important part of her musical inspiration, and her accessible musical style reflects just that. Typical of her inherent warmth is a charming photo on her website with some of her dairy cows. She is a proud descendant of Quaker immigrants, and there is an innate aura of the spiritual in much of her music. That, along with her early background in guitar and American folk music, informs much of our encounter with her art.

Written in 2019, *A Time to Vote* celebrates the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th amendment in 1920, granting women the right to vote. But of course, Wyoming had already been the leader, since women at that time had voted here since 1869—for fifty-one years! There are three movements, "Celebrate," "Gathering Strength," and "Looking Forward—Failure is Impossible!" The work was inspired, in the composer's words:

“...by the efforts and achievements of the women (and men) of the past who worked so tirelessly to gain the women’s right to vote. These were the Suffragettes, their supporters, and those who came before. All praise be given!”

***Stumbling Towards Equality* — Anne Guzzo**

Stumbling Towards Equality was commissioned by the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra for the 150th anniversary of women’s suffrage in Wyoming. Guzzo is a professor at the University of Wyoming whose compositions are enjoying widespread performance throughout the country and abroad. A significant recent milestone was her nomination for an Emmy in 2020 for the documentary film, *State of Equality*. Her musical style has been characterized as drawing upon “science and nature, playful absurdism, and interdisciplinary collaboration.”

The inspiration for the composition and its content are best described by the composer’s own words:

The topic of suffrage, especially in Wyoming, whose official motto is “The Equality State” is fraught with tension and conflict. Suffragettes in the state and across the nation worked hard, organized, protested, and faced violence to gain the vote, to be certain. But while Wyoming’s suffrage movement was legalized 50 years earlier than the rest of the country, and allowed black women to vote, it disenfranchised other women of color. It isn’t at all clear from history and the documentary evidence that it was done for the moral value of equality and had a great deal to do with eligible voters and political party gains. It is both a triumphant and challenging legacy.

Stumbling Towards Equality represents this narrative: the opening of the work is an insistent brass and percussion fanfare that represents a call to arms, an organizing attempt to gain equality for women. The next section belays tensions – the strings play a rhythmic motto in 3/4 time, the snare drum insists on staying in 2/4 time simultaneously, wind instrument melodies try to break through, but are often short or cut off. Amid the tension, there are some delicate and introspective moments (perhaps at the organizing tea parties of the suffragettes) that blossom into a third formal section of the composition, a full-blown romantic melody that is repeated several times with variation. But even today we struggle for equality, so the return of the fanfare, in an extended version, calls us to continue to fight for equality for women, and for all people.

Symphony in E Minor, op. 32 ("Gaelic") — Amy Cheney Beach

Amy Beach was a remarkable woman by any measure. Without doubt she was this country's first woman to have carved out an acclaimed musical career that equaled that of any important American male musician, and transcended most. She enjoyed a noteworthy life as a piano virtuoso, composer, and influential leader in music education, public music advocacy, and music journalism. But it was as a prolific and highly respected composer of the first order that she made her historical mark in American classical music. Simply put, she was our country's first outstanding female composer.

Amy Cheney was born in 1867 in a very small town near the center of New Hampshire, and her astounding musical talents were evident almost from the beginning. Obviously a prodigy, she was singing songs at the age of one, composing for the piano (without its aid) at four, and in general demonstrating amazing musical feats before most children could talk. Her formal study of piano started early, and she soon was performing in public concerts. But her musical studies were centered around her home—all her life her family insisted upon a more or less protected atmosphere. Even after they moved closer to Boston to further her studies, it was not in a conservatory. As Amy gained more and more of a public reputation, her parents stoutly resisted her move into a larger music circle. In a time when almost all talented Americans went abroad for advanced study, Amy stayed home. And it was always to be. She is one of the few significant composers that were total autodidacts. She read, she studied scores, and translated important musical treatises and texts; she absorbed it all.

Her prowess as a performer led to a triumphal concert with the Boston Symphony in 1885, when she was eighteen. But she married a distinguished surgeon twenty-five years her senior right after that and her active career as a performer ended. True to the times and his social class her husband forbade her to perform actively anymore, and to stay home and lead a proper life as a woman of high social status. He did encourage her to compose, and she most certainly did. But she later said that these years were happy ones. While the great majority of her life's work were art songs and chamber music, three large works from the 1890s were highly praised: the *Mass* (1892), the *Gaelic Symphony* (1896), and the Piano Concerto (1899). Unlike so many woman composers, she never endured obscurity—the *Mass* was premièred by the prestigious Boston Handel and Haydn Society, and both the symphony and piano concerto by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The *Gaelic Symphony* is an especial landmark, given that it is the first major symphony composed and published by an American woman. Not only that, it is a fine composition that is somewhat in the style of the symphonies of Brahms and Dvořák—in my opinion, especially the latter. In it she demonstrated eloquently what she had learned on her own: masterful orchestration, melodic gift, dramatic savvy, skill in development, and coordination of large-scale form. The work takes its name from her deep interest and sympathy for the lot of Irish folk, both in Ireland, and in Boston, especially. Like the first four symphonies of Gustav Mahler, her *Gaelic Symphony* makes extensive reference to song. For Beach, Irish melodies, as well as some of her own, serve for source material.

The first movement makes extensive use of an art song that she had written a few years earlier, *Dark is the Night*, a tempestuous sea song. The low,

rumbling opening aptly evokes stormy seas, leading to the main themes. Both derive from the song, but at her expert hands they don't simply serve as quotable melodies, but undergo a sophisticated expansion and manipulation. The third theme is perhaps more lyric, and sounds like a kind of Irish dance, with a bagpipe-like drone in the accompaniment. An extensive, dramatic development ensues that, after an impressive build up, leads to the recapitulation, marked clearly by a pensive clarinet solo in the low register. A rousing coda follows. Throughout, Beach indulges in the chromaticism and rich variety of key areas typical of late German Romanticism—and the mood of her sea, like that of Debussy's *La Mer*, rapidly swings between light and darkness.

A dance-like scherzo movement has long been more or less conventional for a symphony, but in this case, Beach—like Brahms—cleverly introduces a creative twist to the old recipe of a tripartite relaxed middle section bookended by more energetic ones. Rather, she opens and ends with a gentle siciliano dance with a bustling middle section. The chief melodic material is based upon the song, “The Little Field of Barley.” Her precocious mastery of orchestral color surfaces in the graceful solos for winds in both siciliano sections. The middle section is a scintillating dash of a scherzo—it would have done justice to Berlioz in its élan. A wisp of a reference to it serves as a codetta at the end of the last siciliano.

Two traditional Irish tunes — “Cushlamachree” and “Which Way Did She Go?” -- provide material for the dark-colored third movement. Beach commented specifically that the mood stems from the “laments” of the Irish and their long travails. After a brief introduction featuring the woodwinds, an impassioned violin solo, marked *quasi recitativo* soon is joined in duet by the solo violoncello, only to then pass it over to the woodwind section.

Beach employs the traditional sonata form for the last movement, and it is a dynamic one, indeed. She wrote of the “rough, primitive nature of the Celtic people” and it is writ large here to be sure. No traditional folk songs inform the movement, but her acknowledged melodic gifts suggest them. After a *tutti* outburst, soft bustling strings set the mood. The energetic first theme has a sharply profiled rhythm that is soon omnipresent—first heard in the woodwinds, but soon taken by all. In admirable economy of means, the movement deftly plunges ahead. It doesn't take long to reach the lyrical second theme, heard in the low strings and bassoons. The development is introduced by a stentorian interruption in the low brass that would do justice to Bruckner. The themes are dutifully worked through, in a refreshing bout of keys, and the recap is soon upon us. In the best fashion it builds in cascades of excitement, all the time working with the two familiar themes, supported by strong pronouncements in the brass in the best romantic fashion. Finally, the beatific key of E major signals our final triumph.

--Wm. E. Runyan
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