



Cheyenne
Symphony
Orchestra

Masterpiece 3 – Made in America

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Overture to The School for Scandal, op. 5 – Samuel Barber

If any composer may truly be considered our national composer, Samuel Barber should surely be in the running. Notwithstanding the adulation of Aaron Copland's populist music from the 1930s and 40s, most of the latter composer's compositions in other musical styles are not well received by the American public--too dissonant and modern! On the other hand, no major American composer of the twentieth century was a more ardent and eloquent champion of a lyrical, accessible, yet modern idiom than Samuel Barber. His musical style is founded in the romantic traditions of the nineteenth century, whose harmonic language and formal structures were his point of departure. Unlike so many of his peers, he was not powerfully swayed by the modernism emanating from Europe after World War I but pursued his own path.

Consistently lyrical throughout his career, it is telling that his songs constitute about two-thirds of his compositions in number. His vocal works include two major operas, *Vanessa* (1956), and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966), the latter composed for the opening of the Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center. He composed at least one work for almost every musical genre, and unlike most composers, he was a recognized and published composer from his student days.

Composed in 1931 when he was twenty-one and still a student at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, his *Overture to The School for Scandal* was an instant success, was forthwith published, and remains in the standard repertoire. Barber wrote it for a stage production of the famous eighteenth-century comedy of manners by Richard Brinsley Sheridan. It was given its première by the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1933. The play itself is a biting satirical essay of intrigue, greed, and wit that has almost no peers in the English theatre. Still holding a central place in the theatrical canon, its scintillating, rapid pace of clever dialogue and general buoyancy practically leaves the audience breathless. And all of that wit and spirited repartee is brilliantly captured by Barber in this sizzling concert overture.

Serenade for Orchestra – William Grant Still

Still was a pioneer for African-Americans in "classical" music composition; he was the first American black man in practically everything having to do with conducting and composing for symphony orchestras and opera companies. The scion of a distinguished family, he was a descendent of the famous 19th century abolitionist, William Still. While more fortunate members of the family bought their freedom or escaped north, his immediate family was left behind in slavery in the southernmost isolated county in Mississippi (south of Natchez). He was born in Woodville, Mississippi in 1895 to a remarkable woman, who took him out of that agrarian obscurity to Little Rock, Arkansas, where she went on to teach high school for many decades. She and his

stepfather gave him great encouragement and created an artistic home environment in what were obviously difficult times for folks with their aspirations. With encouragement and apparently great ambition, he learned the violin, cello, and oboe, and at an early age attended Wilberforce University in Ohio with the goal of becoming a composer—especially for the symphony and opera. Soon thereafter he enrolled in Oberlin College, and after military service in WWI, he accepted a position with W.C. Handy (composer of *The Saint Louis Blues*) in New York City.

His career there blossomed—while not achieving fame as a composer right away, he nevertheless worked at the highest levels of New York musical circles as an arranger. Radio and musical theatre became his métier, and a veritable Who’s Who of musical luminaries became his associates: Paul Whiteman, Artie Shaw, Sophie Tucker, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake—the list is impressive and long. Along the way he studied musical composition, most notably with the important early twentieth-century composer, Edgar Varèse. Soon a flood of works ensued, and his music ultimately was performed by groups such as the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the BBC Orchestra, to name just a few. He left New York in the mid-1930s for Los Angeles, where he spent the rest of his life, and began another successful career arranging and composing for the film and television industry but focusing on “serious” composition. From then on, a torrent of works ensued: operas, ballets, symphonic poems, orchestral suites, choral music, songs, and five symphonies.

Serenade was composed in 1957 for the Great Falls High School in Montana. Still’s lifelong immersion in the stunningly diverse styles and demands of American popular music come to the fore here. That, his remarkable gift for melody, his mastery of orchestration, and skill at creating just the right musical atmosphere all bespeak of a distinguished career in stage, radio, and television. *Serenade* is cast into a conventional tripartite form that features the ‘cellos in the opening with woodwinds leading in the more active diversion in the middle, returning to the initial material at the end. The cantabile beginning is somewhat redolent of Debussy’s “En bateau” of the *Petite Suite*. But, withal, Still’s gentle work is infused with thoroughly American harmonies and tunes and is all his own.

***Dances in the Canebrakes* – Florence Price**

Florence Price, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, was a pioneer black American composer who distinguished herself early on. Most notably, she is remembered as the first black American woman to garner success as a composer of symphonic music. Her first symphony is perhaps her best-known work. Winner of a national prize, it was given its première in 1933 by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—a social and cultural milestone in this country at that time.

At a young age she journeyed north to Boston to study at the New England Conservatory, and returned to Arkansas and Georgia to teach at various small black colleges. After marriage she and her husband left a racially troubled Arkansas in 1927 for Chicago and her further study at the American Conservatory of Music. Her career blossomed, and recognition for her art led to the afore-mentioned symphony in 1931, followed by two more symphonies, concertos, and other works for orchestra. She composed in a variety of other genres: chamber works, piano music, and vocal

compositions--over three hundred in all! Her songs and arrangements of spirituals were perhaps her most performed compositions. But, sadly, little of her *œuvre* has been published; but with her increasing popularity today, that situation is rapidly changing.

Price was a prolific composer of piano works and this three-movement suite for piano solo was composed shortly before her death. It was later orchestrated by the eminent fellow Southern composer, William Grant Still. The snazzy first movement, "Nimble Feet," is clearly in ragtime style, infused with its characteristic syncopations. "Tropical Moon" is redolent of a languorous Caribbean evening, with its intimation of what Jelly Roll Morton called a "slow drag," or jazz's "Spanish Tinge." Others may think of it as similar to a tango. In any case, it's immensely seductive. Finally, the last movement, "Silk Hat and Walking Cane," evokes nothing of the hard labor of working in the cane fields. Rather, it is all about escaping that, and finding a bit of refuge in the urban fancy balls and social gatherings that often featured the dance called the "cake walk." Associated with African-American dances, it may be remembered even in Debussy's tribute, *Golliwog's Cakewalk*. It probably originated on antebellum plantations as a black satire of white society but evolved into a complex life in the whole controversial minstrel show tradition. It, too, has a *habanera* rhythm, woven into ragtime textures.

This little suite, while modest in scope, is a gem of crafting popular ethnic musical elements into an artful and charming work of art. Price, as with so many accomplished composers, was as capable of composing for the salon as for the symphony hall.

***Lincoln Portrait* – Aaron Copland**

Aaron Copland is generally considered America's greatest composer. That is, it is he, through his compositions and through his essays, books, lectures, and other thoughts on music, who has done more than any other individual to establish a corpus of "serious" music in this country that has largely defined an "American Sound." He lived a long life; influenced generations of young composers; advanced the cause of art music in this country; and composed music that has delighted millions in the audiences of ballet, chamber music, symphonic music, radio, television, and the movies. The son of Jewish immigrants, he lived for most of his life in New York City—or close by—but assimilated so much of the disparate elements of our culture that he came to be considered as representative of all of it. In his music one finds jazz, ethnic, western, folk, intellectual, and populist elements and references—and much more: Cuban, Mexican, and European Continental. But his wide-ranging intellect easily synthesized it all into an inimitable style (or small group of stylistic voices) with which his music spoke with a clear and unified expression.

His greatest musical influence was undoubtedly the *grande dame* of teachers, Mme. Nadia Boulanger, with whom he studied in Paris during the early 1920s. Teacher of generations of distinguished performers and composers, she counted Copland as her greatest pupil. Of course, while spending those years in Paris—along with the so-called "lost" generation (Copland was assuredly not part of it)—he was exposed to a wealth of musical styles and composers. Of them, Stravinsky was the other great influence upon Copland.

Upon his return to the USA his early dalliance with jazz and “symphonic jazz” was more or less replaced by a severe, often dissonant style—one not often associated with Copland by much of today’s audiences, but definitely a life-long option for him in his compositions. But during the 1930s his interest in socialist perspectives crystallized for him and he turned to a more accessible, populist style that has come to be his hallmark for mainstream America. His ballets, *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, and *Appalachian Spring*, as well as his music for the films, *Of Mice and Men* and *Our Town* and other works all endeared him to a wide audience and made his reputation as composer of “American” music. He continued that trend with music for the film adaptation of Steinbeck’s *Red Pony*, and even wrote a clarinet concerto for the great Benny Goodman. How mainstream American can you get?

The advent of World War II wrought massive changes to American society, and its existential threat to the country stimulated an understandable surge in patriotism. And those of the classical music establishment then—unlike much of it today—rushed to participate in celebrating our country’s history and values. We all thrill to Copland’s *Fanfare for the Common Man*; it was the result of a 1942 commission of eighteen of America’s leading composers for fanfares to honor and celebrate those fighting in the war effort.

A similar inspiration led to Copland’s *A Lincoln Portrait*. For the 1942-43 symphonic season, the conductor, André Kostelanetz commissioned Virgil Thompson, Jerome Kern, and Copland each to compose a portrait of the “magnificent spirit of our country.” For his contribution Copland had initially chosen the words of Walt Whitman, but he wisely acceded to Kostelanetz’s urging to turn to the magnificent, timeless rhetoric of Lincoln, instead. Those words, combined with Copland’s populist “American Style,” produced a profound work.

Those whose know and love Copland’s music from that time will immediately find familiar the musical “portrait.” Copland wove together the simple elements of that style with his own melodies, but also incorporated two traditional American folk tunes, as well. One—easily heard—is “Camptown Races,” which the composer chose because it had been used as one of Lincoln’s campaign songs.

A Lincoln Portrait is basically in two broad sections: The first is composed of three contrasting musical vignettes of Lincoln and his times. The second introduces the narration of Lincoln’s words, accompanied by stirring recitative-like accompaniment from the orchestra. The opening of the first section is tranquil, but ominous in its evocation of the constant dangers to our country—then and now. Copland said that he “...hoped to suggest something of the mysterious sense of fatality that surrounds Lincoln’s personality.” That he manifestly did. The music slowly grows in intensity, informed by a simple, three-note motive so typical of the composer. As it swells in power and dignity, it seems to validate all to come. The second of the three musical vignettes begins with the solo clarinet, and is infused with much of the plain charm of Copland’s opera, *The Tender Land*. Finally, the first large section ends with upbeat folk dances that gradually are eclipsed by a broad, powerful countermelody that leads us inexorably to the serious matter of Lincoln’s text in the second part. A dramatic smash on the gong and brass figures reminiscent of the *Fanfare for the Common Man* sets the tone for the words that follow.

Lincoln's words include excerpts from the Gettysburg Address, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and one of his State of the Union speeches. Copland artfully crafts the accompaniment to the text: bold or quiet, dramatic or serene, wistful or triumphal—accordingly. In the best tradition of music and words, they mutually enhance each other, and the union is a work that never fails to engender both pride and reflection regarding our great experiment in democracy.

The work truly was an inspiration for the difficult times of the war, but about 1950 both Copland's musical style and his popular place in society took a distinct turn. His earlier support of socialist causes (he supported the American Communist Party in the election of 1936) made him a target of Red Hysteria and Senator McCarthy. The Republican Party cancelled a performance of his *Lincoln Portrait* for Ike's inauguration, and other indignities followed him for a few years.

His music began—but not completely—to return to the severe and dissonant basis that characterized his early work, and he disappointed those who commissioned works thinking they were going to get another *Appalachian Spring*. By 1972, in his own words, it was “as if someone had simply turned off a faucet,” and he gave up composition completely. He died in 1990 of Alzheimer's disease.

***Gee's Bend for Electric Guitar and Orchestra* – Michael Daugherty**

It's hard to know just where to start with this work and composer. Suffice it say that Michael Daugherty and his musical style springs directly from the heart of contemporary American culture. He now occupies an esteemed position as Professor of Composition in the music school of the University of Michigan and has written compositions for just about anybody and everybody in the “official” world of classical music culture—major orchestras, music schools and conservatories, distinguished performers, enterprising conductors—you name it, he is clearly the current darling of progressive concert music. He has a “Zelig”-like persona whose musical roots and subsequent musical education seems to have touched just about every base. But his background could not be more prosaic—in the best sense of the word. He grew up, like the average American kid, surrounded by the pervasive influence of television, rock and roll, rampant commercialization, cathartic political events, in short, just about everything condemned by European intellectuals as typical of the depravity of American society. Growing up in Iowa, in a musical family of middle-class tastes, he played in rock bands, accompanied country-western performers on the Hammond organ at county fairs, carried the bass drum in marching bands, studied at North Texas State, played jazz piano, as well as cocktail piano at a lounge on the Jersey Turnpike. That's plenty, right there. But, wait! There's more.

After moving to New York, where he hobnobbed with such *avant garde* intellectuals such as Milton Babbitt and Pierre Boulez, he moved to Paris where he studied electronic music, later studying in Germany with Ligeti and Stockhausen and, well, you get the idea. He's touched almost every musical base from the ridiculous to the sublime—American populism to European intellectualism. Along the way he received a doctoral degree from Yale, writing on Ives and Mahler. His personal musical style is accordingly broad; some compositions hold their own with the most received, academic style and others are eclectic, to say the least. He has built a reputation in the latter mode

for compositions like “Dead Elvis” (the solo bassoonist is in the costume of the “King”), orchestra compositions inspired by Superman, Jackie Onassis, Hell’s Angels, and other icons of American pop culture. But, withal, he is a thoughtful, polite, articulate, and flexible teacher of young composition students. Not at all an *enfant terrible*.

Gee’s Bend was inspired by the story of the black ladies in the small town of the same name, who—aided by an article in *The New Yorker*--came to enjoy national recognition for their inspired and imaginative quilting, garnering shows at major American art museums, including the Whitney Museum. The little village has a long and sad history, is located in an isolated portion of southern Alabama, and the milieu and story provided ample specific inspirations for the composer. Cast in four movements, the concerto’s first movement, “Housetop,” takes its name from a popular quilting pattern, and utilizes the psychedelic electronic distortions associated with the rock legend, Jimi Hendrix. The second movement, “Grandmother’s Dream,” is a gentle, atmospheric evocation of the old ladies’ memories of their difficult past, and hope for the future—expressed through their art. “Washboard” evokes the traditional quilting bees that rely upon collaborative art, and so does the music in this third movement, with some marvelous “funky” solos from members of the woodwind section (they will have fun with this stuff). The last movement, “Chicken Pickin’,” refers to both poultry and guitars—especially the virtuosity of southern guitar greats—from Bo Diddley to Lynyrd Skynyrd. Woven in all this are some allusions to familiar spirituals.

It’s all quite different from the usual symphonic fare, that’s for sure, but the composer is earnest, talented, and brings a distinctive perspective to our “classical” endeavors. In his own words: *Gee’s Bend* intertwines “American guitar rock and southern folk music with contemporary classical music to create a colorful and unique tapestry of sound.” That it does.

--Wm. E. Runyan
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