Program notes – Glen Phillips concert

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550

“I write music the way a sow pisses.”

Who said it? Mick Jagger? John Lennon? Sid Vicious? Johnny Rotten? Kurt Cobain? Answer: none of the above – the author of these words was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Classical music’s bewigged boy genius. As far as anyone can tell, he was right – Mozart wrote over 1,000 pieces of music (including 41 symphonies) in a life cut tragically short by overwork and illness.

We all know the story from the movie Amadeus: Child prodigy Mozart grows up to be a foul-mouthed but brilliantly talented man-child. He offends stodgy old Salieri, who sabotages Mozart professionally and then poisons him in order to claim Mozart’s final work (his Requiem Mass) as his own work and have the last laugh at God. Mozart was too poor to be given a proper burial, and so his body was dumped into a communal pauper’s grave. Right? Well, no, not really...

While we have no real evidence that Mozart and Salieri were close friends, a composition rediscovered in November 2015 has been proven to be a collaboration between the supposed rivals. As for Mozart’s poverty, it is estimated that his annual income in Vienna would have been the equivalent of $150,000 today, and that Mozart was buried in a communal grave not because he couldn’t afford his own burial plot, but for the sake of public safety – he died while a bout of plague raged through Vienna, and the Emperor ordered all corpses (not just plague victims) to be buried in communal graves well outside the city limits in the hope of controlling the spread of the disease.

Amadeus is largely correct on one count: Mozart was a bit of a potty mouth. His letters to his sister Nannerl usually begin with a recap of all the dirty jokes he had heard that week. From examining his letters and eyewitness accounts of his behavior, some medical researchers have even suggested that Mozart suffered from a mild form of Tourette’s Syndrome.

Personal quirks aside, why so much music? Our expectations of classical music are different today. For better or worse, old music dominates our classical concert programs. In the 18th century, what we call “classical” music was the pop music of its time, with the emphasis on the new. A symphony or string quartet would be played in public a few times and then shelved; audiences constantly demanded new works in the concert hall and the opera house. Composers usually wrote on commission for their wealthy patrons or for orchestras and opera companies looking for new music by “trending” composers. Those composers wrote for the present, not the future, hence Mozart’s 41 Symphonies and Joseph Haydn’s 70-plus string quartets. Writing music wasn’t about expressing your emotions as much as it was crafting excellent musical structures – the composer’s own emotions were kept hidden.

Sometimes, however, the mask slips. Mozart’s Symphony No. 40 is one of only two symphonies Mozart wrote in a minor key. Its disturbing opening, a meditative, yearning melody over a pulsating string accompaniment, betrays turbulent emotions as it leaps upwards and then descends into chromatic
unease before the full orchestra shouts it into silence. Through its wide-ranging emotions and jagged melodic lines, the symphony is miles away from the sunny opening of his “Jupiter” Symphony (No. 41).

And herein lies the mystery: Mozart never heard the G-minor symphony in a public performance. In fact, no one did – it was a set of three symphonies (Nos. 39 – 41) found in manuscript after his death. Never heard during his lifetime, no record of a commission for these works, just three of the supreme examples of the Classical symphony from the pen of an undisputed master. Perhaps part of Mozart’s genius is that like the sow he mentions in his letter, he had an innate need to bring his music into the world because it was inside of him just waiting to get out. Rather than trying to analyze why, perhaps it’s best that we are grateful for the miracle that is Mozart, and appreciate the personal glimpse he gives us through this G-minor Symphony.

**Samuel Barber: Adagio for Strings, Op. 11**

Question No. 2 in tonight’s quiz: What do the following tragedies have in common?

- The deaths of Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, and Diana, Princess of Wales
- The funerals of Albert Einstein and Princess Grace of Monaco
- The terrorist attacks of 9/11, on the offices of the Parisian humor magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 and the Brussels attacks in March of this year

Answer: all of these events were commemorated by performances of Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*. If most casual listeners know one piece by Samuel Barber, it would be his Adagio for Strings. Barber’s *Adagio* seems to be an almost universal expression of sorrow, both in the United States and around the world. Its place in our culture seems to transcend the bonds of a work of mourning. The *Adagio* has been heard in many different media, from episodes of *Seinfeld, South Park,* and *How I Met Your Mother,* to movies from *The Elephant Man* to *Amélie.* Its most memorable cinematic appearance may have been as the heart-wrenching undercurrent to Oliver Stone’s film *Platoon* (1986). It even served as part of the soundtrack to the video game *Homeworld* and has been sampled by electronic dance artists William Orbit, Ferry Corsten, Armin van Buuren, Tiësto, Mark Sixma, Bastille and Arnej. For a single work to maintain this kind of influence eighty years after its creation is remarkable.

But where did this piece come from? Mozart is not the only *Wunderkind* on tonight’s program. Consider the case of Samuel Barber: born into a cultured family (his aunt Louise Homer was a star with the Metropolitan Opera), he started composing at age 6. When he was 9, he wrote a letter to his mother:

> Dear Mother: I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Now don’t cry when you read it because it is neither your nor my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now without any nonsense. To begin with I was not meant to be an athlet(sic). I was meant to be a composer, and will be I’m sure. I’ll ask you one more thing. — Don’t ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football. — Please — Sometimes I’ve been worrying about this so much that it makes me mad (not very).

The precocious Barber was accepted as a student at the Curtis Institute at the age of 14 and scored the trifecta of completing degrees in composing, piano and voice. He even sang the vocal part himself for the first
commercial recording of his song *Dover Beach*. After graduation, the musical world was his for the taking – singers, instrumentalists and conductors all wanted to play his music. He won awards (both the *Prix de Rome* and a Guggenheim Fellowship) and received dozens of commissions.

And yet, like Mozart and other child prodigies (and many pop stars as well), Barber’s star faded in later adulthood. The avant-garde trash-talked his romantically-tinged modernism and for those composers and listeners on the cutting edge, his music was considered quaint and old-fashioned by about 1950. His attempts to incorporate more modern elements into his music were met with skepticism by both critics and audiences. One of the largest projects of his life, his opera *Anthony and Cleopatra*, was an abject failure at its premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1966, and the savagery unleashed upon it by the critics wounded Barber very deeply. He wrote very little music in the last two decades of his life, sinking into depression and alcoholism. He succumbed to cancer in 1990.

Barber’s *Adagio* was not born from tragedy or mourning. In 1938, Barber’s *Essay for Orchestra* was programmed for national broadcast by the NBC Symphony under the direction of the great Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini. Because the *Essay* was relatively short, Toscanini requested another brief work from the young composer. Barber had no other new orchestral works at hand, so he sent Toscanini his arrangement of the slow movement of his string quartet, to which he gave the title *Adagio for Strings*. Toscanini returned the score to Barber without comment, which gave the young composer a severe bout of self-doubt. As it turned out, Toscanini had already memorized the work and included it on the program with the *Essay*. After the first rehearsal, the maestro turned to his players, smiled and said “Semplice e bella” (“Simple and beautiful”). After the premiere, Toscanini kept the work in the orchestra’s repertoire, performing it on tours through Europe and South America.

Toscanini’s words are a perfect description of the *Adagio for Strings*. A single melodic line rises and unfolds in the violins, like the tendril of a plant breaking through the soil and straining towards the sun. The melodic melismas grow longer and pass back and forth between instruments, expressing an endless, unsatisfied yearning. At the climax of the work, these straining voices are suddenly silent, as though not even music can express the depth of the intended emotion. The string lines hesitate, falter and gradually die away, achieving peace only at the very end, where the final chord offers the tiniest ray of hope that the grief expressed will not last forever.

**Aaron Copland: “Simple Gifts” from *Appalachian Spring***

*"If a gifted young man can write a symphony like this at age 23, within five years he will be ready to commit murder."*

It almost sounds like a quote about Beethoven or Mahler, perhaps Schoenberg or Stravinsky. This quote, too, is surprising: conductor Walter Damrosch uttered these words about the young Aaron Copland. Copland began his career as an unashamed modernist, influenced by such avant garde heavy hitters as Prokofiev, Bartók and Stravinsky. Jazz influences abound in his earlier works, like his Piano Concerto and *Music for the Theater*.

But over time, Copland began listening to other voices as well – American folk and popular music from both past and present and from South America as well as North. As Copland absorbed these new sounds into his musical vocabulary, the simplicity of American folk song fused with the modernist techniques Copland had learned in Europe. The result was a spare but communicative style, both immediate and intellectual. It was as
though Copland had taken to heart Thoreau’s urgings to “Simplify, simplify!” In works like *El Sálon México, Billy the Kid, Fanfare for the Common Man, Rodeo*, and his opera *The Tender Land*, Copland spoke in a musical language both learned and vernacular at the same time. His particular musical dialect permeated his works for the concert hall as well as for the stage and screen; it could be said that Copland was the first composer to “speak American.”

In 1942, the pioneering dancer and choreographer Martha Graham commissioned Copland to write a ballet score, stipulating only that it be on an American theme. While composing the music, Copland gave it the working title *Ballet for Martha*, but had no specific scenario in mind. Graham suggested the title largely because of Copland’s use of the Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts” which concludes the ballet. In later years, Copland admitted that he chuckled at the well-meaning listeners who told him how well the piece captured the pioneer spirit of Appalachia, even though he was thinking of nothing of the sort when he wrote it.

Originally written for just thirteen instruments, Copland later extracted a suite from the ballet for concert use. He was later persuaded by the conductor Artur Rodzinski to arrange the suite for full symphony orchestra. It is the finale of the suite for chamber orchestra that we’ll hear this evening, featuring his evocative treatment of “Simple Gifts.”

Copland draws upon the simplicity of the Shaker tune to evoke both calm and activity. A serene solo clarinet first sings this hymn with sparse string accompaniment. What follows is a series of variations on this basic tune, presented in different colors and speeds, concluding with a grand statement of the tune by the full ensemble. After this grandiose climax, the hymn-like textures fade away, leaving the clarinet to lead us into serenity and finally silence.

**Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky: Serenade for Strings, Op. 48, fourth movement**

It’s odd to think that Tchaikovsky’s Serenade for Strings served as background music for one of the most cataclysmic events in human history: the test of the first atomic bomb at the Trinity site in New Mexico in 1945. By a strange quirk, the Voice of America Network was broadcasting the Serenade on the same frequency that the Los Alamos scientists were using to monitor the test. Beyond his famous quote from the Bhagavad-Gita (“I am become Death, destroyer of worlds”), one wonders what J. Robert Oppenheimer thought of the surreal juxtaposition of Tchaikovsky’s gloriously sunny music with the grim reality of the dawn of the nuclear age.

When Tchaikovsky wrote the Serenade, he was working on another piece simultaneously, a work to celebrate a memorial in Moscow dedicated to the poet Aleksandr Pushkin. Tchaikovsky said of the other work, “What can you write on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition except banalities and generally noisy passages?” He concluded that this piece was written “with no warm feeling of love, and therefore there will probably be no artistic merits in it.” Perhaps that piece would have been more appropriate for broadcast at Los Alamos; the work he described was the *1812 Overture*.

For the Serenade, Tchaikovsky had nothing but the fondest regard. He wrote to his patroness, Madame von Meck, that it was written out of an inner need (rather than from a commission) and that he hoped that listeners would find some artistic merit in it.

Tchaikovsky drew comparisons between the first movement and the music of Mozart’s serenades, but in the finale that we’ll hear tonight, the composition bears kinship to Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*. After a
short introduction, based on a Russian folk song, the strings jump headfirst into a lively *hopak*. This is also a Russian folk melody which Tchaikovsky fragments and develops throughout the movement, showing us a seemingly endless kaleidoscope of the glittering facets of this tune. A soaring and ravishingly beautiful tune provides contrast; it’s first heard in the cellos under a balalaika-like plucked accompaniment. At the climax of the movement, the hymn-like opening of the first movement of the Serenade returns, majestically sung by the entire ensemble. Just when it seems like this chorale will bring the Serenade to a heroic conclusion, the lively dance reasserts itself, madly rushing to the final cadence, dancing itself (and us) into eternity.

Program notes by Dr. David Cole