Southwest Florida Symphony 2017 – 2018 Season  
Small Stage Symphonies III – March 7 and 8, 2018  
From Copland to Classics

Notes on the program by Dr. David Cole

Samuel Barber: Adagio for Strings, Op. 11

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? 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: *Quiet City*

It’s safe to say that most of us imagine a romanticized view of the life of a classical composer. Our vision might conjure up a somewhat unkempt individual working sitting at a ramshackle desk and ancient creaking chair in front of a decrepit brazier in some freezing attic, either waiting for the Muse to speak, or furiously scribbling down the white-hot conflagration of inspiration’s lightning strike before the flow
of ideas slows to a trickle. It’s not a requirement that the composer live in poverty or suffer endless rejection in pursuit of their Immortal Beloved, but it does bolster the stereotype of the passionate artist struggling against an indifferent world to create his or her soul-stirring masterpieces.

The actual life of a composer is much different. While working in Leipzig, Bach was as much impresario as composer; his duties included securing musicians for Sunday services for three other Leipzig churches in addition to his own and teaching Latin to his choirboys. Schumann and Berlioz both wrote music criticism, Benjamin Britten and Morton Gould worked extensively in radio and television, and William Walton and Dmitri Shostakovich each wrote an extensive catalogue of film music. While it’s certain each of these composers experienced their fair share of compositional “Eureka!” moments, they were also so well trained in the craft of music that they raised what might have been dreary “workaday” music to the level of high art through their own skill and diligence.

We tend to remember Aaron Copland’s large-scale works and those that reflect the essence of the history and patriotic impulse of the citizens of the United States. From Rodeo and Billy the Kid to Fanfare for the Common Man, Appalachian Spring and Lincoln Portrait, Copland’s music is suffused with the essence of the American experience, to the point of being grouped with baseball, apple pie and the Fourth of July.

Yet Copland, too, wrote music to order for the commissions he received, and for radio and film. In the 1930s, while achieving his earliest successes with El Salon México and Billy the Kid, Copland wrote music for Group Theater, a New York troupe devoted to productions of contemporary drama but with ticket prices anyone could afford. The young playwrights associated with the group included Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, Clifford Odets, Elia Kazan and Irwin Shaw.

Quiet City began life as part of a score of incidental music that Copland had written Shaw’s play of the same name. It was the story of two brothers, one who changed his name to advance his career in the world of business, and the other who remained faithful to his dream of becoming a jazz trumpet player. While the play was far from successful, Copland reworked some of the incidental music into the short orchestral work Quiet City. Copland added an English horn to the ensemble of trumpet and string orchestra, both to provide a breather for the trumpet soloist and for contrasting textures and colors. The finished work is a miniature sound scape of a 1930s city at night, and it’s tempting to think that Copland drew upon his memories of his Brooklyn childhood.

The work opens with an ethereal chordal texture in strings and English horn. The trumpet enters with a mysterious recitative over accented chords in the strings leading to a brief trumpet cadenza. The English horn and the trumpet sing to one another freely and rhapsodically over a discreet string accompaniment. The middle section introduces a more rhythmic figure in the strings, prompting both soloists to more rapturous dialogue with each other. The music rises to an impassioned climax, with the strings fervently singing to match the trumpet and English horn. With that climactic moment, the music gradually fades away, with the solos becoming more distant and more nostalgic in tone. The calm and mystery of the opening return to bring the work to a serene close.
Carl Stamitz: Viola Concerto in D major, Op. 1

From listening to some musicians and concert-goers, you might get the impression that the viola is the Rodney Dangerfield of instruments. The larger cousin of the violin receives little or no respect, either as a soloist or as part of orchestras or chamber ensembles. The digital age has seen a proliferation of viola jokes, to the point of earning a Wikipedia entry along with multiple websites devoted to their preservation and dissemination.

The viola also suffers from an acoustic disadvantage. The usual body length for a viola played by an adult is somewhere between 15 ½ and 18 ½ inches. For the viola to achieve acoustic equality with the violin or the cello, the body of the instrument would optimally be between 20 and 23 inches, which would make the instrument nearly impossible to play tucked under the chin. Barring a change to holding the instrument like a cello or tinkering with the human genome enough to genetically engineer long-armed violists, musicians and listeners will have to be content with the viola as it is.

Yet in many ways, violists and their admirers are having the last laugh. Many composers not only admired the viola, but played it as well – most notably Mozart and Dvořák. Over the last century or more, the advocacy of viola virtuosi like Henri Vieuxtemps, Paul Hindemith, Lionel Tertis and William Primrose have helped to create a whole new repertoire. Their groundbreaking leadership brought the instrument from ridicule to distinction and spawned a whole new generation of great violists, from Yuri Bashmet to Kim Kashkashian and Tabea Zimmerman.

Carl Stamitz was the son of Johann Stamitz, the principal composer and driving force of the Mannheim School, the group of composers and orchestral musicians who helped to shape the Classical style. The virtuosity of the Mannheim orchestra was known throughout Europe (Charles Burney called them “an orchestra of generals”), and Carl played in the orchestra beginning in 1770. While disparaged by Mozart (he referred to Carl and his brother Anton as “two wretched scribblers, gamblers, swillers {i.e., drunks} and adulterers” in a letter to his father), Carl and his music were held in high regard throughout Europe, especially his concertos for viola and clarinet.

The D major viola concerto may have served Stamitz as a musical “calling card,” a means by which to make his music better known throughout Europe and attract the attention of noble patrons. He published it as his Opus 1, indicating that he considered it his first work worthy of publication.

The concerto is in the standard three movements of the Classical concerto. The orchestra presents two themes at the opening of the first movement, one stately, the other more lyrical. The soloists enters with a bravura version of the opening theme, adorned with double stops and elaborated upon with arpeggios and rapid scale passages. The slow movement, in D minor, allows the viola to sing its lament sweetly over a pulsating string accompaniment, punctuated by stark unisons from the string section. The finale’s jolly peasant dance gives the violist even greater opportunity for virtuoso display, especially in the final return of the opening rondo section. Truly a concerto to silence even the most mean-spirited purveyor of viola jokes!
Pyotr (Peter) Ilich Tchaikovsky: Serenade for Strings, Op. 48, fourth movement

When Tchaikovsky wrote his Serenade for Strings, 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.” 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 Tchaikovsky’s own ballets.

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.

Mozart: Symphony No. 29 in A major, K. 201

It’s been said that Thomas Edison went through over two thousand different versions of his incandescent lightbulb before he found the one workable model that would be the forerunner of the lightbulbs we know today. The adage “practice makes perfect” is an unchallenged aphorism, and it’s no surprise that most composers grow in technical skill and musical sophistication from their earliest works to their last. One needs to look no further than the symphonies of Joseph Haydn to follow their development from light entertainment pieces in the Rococo style to the challenging and profound symphonies written for his visits to London.

While the numerous examples of Mozart’s musical facility lead us to believe that all composition came easily to him, he was not a natural composer of symphonies, at least in his youth. His growth in this area took longer than with other musical genres. “Longer,” in his case, meaning that we can mark his symphonic maturity with two symphonies written in his eighteenth year, the Symphony No. 25 in G minor, K. 183 and the Symphony No. 29 in A major, K. 201. Both of these works see a greater sophistication of melody and harmony along with a more extensive use of the woodwind and brass instruments, a facility that would grow with the composition of his mature operas.

Two factors are important to consider when examining Mozart’s development as a symphonist. In Mozart’s time, music was something of a short-lived commodity, much like most of pop music of today.
A work would be given a performance or two, and then newer works would gain popularity to relegate it to rapid obscurity. Composers like Haydn were prolific because there was a constant demand for new music, whether it be from a noble patron or from opera house audiences. Mozart wrote within this tradition, so it is no surprise that his early works were in the style of what was popular at the time.

Mozart’s travels throughout Europe in his youth were his other symphonic influence. His travels as a touring prodigy exposed him to the best composers and performers of the time, from CPE Bach to the Papal Chapel choir and the Mannheim orchestra. Mozart was able to absorb the best parts of these styles like a musical sponge, and he processed through his own music to create works that were reflective of the best music in Europe and yet still original.

The Symphony No. 29 probably reflects the forces available to him at the Salzburg court at the time (1774). The work is scored for pairs of oboes and horns in addition to the usual string section. The horns are pitched in one of the highest keys of the time, A major, giving the symphony a bright, festive tone. A major is also a very resonant key for string instruments, which adds to the sparkle of the work.

The opening movement opens quietly with the drop of an octave, followed by a graceful figure leading to another octave drop. This figure will provide the musical material for most of this movement, with the second them providing graceful contrast to the complex harmonic and melodic adventures of the rest of the movement. In the slow movement, Mozart mutes the strings, giving the movement a subdued elegance as it sings its opera aria without words. The dotted rhythms that pervade the minuet are by turns coy, elegant, jaunty, and stern, while the trio’s suave phrases are haunted by echoes of that same dotted figure. The boisterous finale is an exuberant take on the “hunting” finales in 6/8 meter found in many Classical symphonies of the time, but the interplay between different sections of the orchestra, the virtuoso scales in the strings, the challenging passages in the horns, and the ingenuity and variety of the melodic material show Mozart transcending his musical models. The work ends in arpeggiated fireworks in the strings responding to the joyful chortling in the horns.