

Respighi, Barber, Berio, & Ives

January 22, 2022

Trittico Botticelliano

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936)

Premiered by the New York Philharmonic in March 1932.

Ottorino Respighi was born in Bologna, Italy and much of his music evokes a nationalist homage to his origins. At the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Respighi encountered three paintings by Sandro Botticelli - *La Primavera (Spring)*, *L'Adorazione dei Magi (The Adoration of the Magi)*, and *La Nascita di Venere (The Birth of Venus)*. These paintings inspired his programmatic composition, *Trittico Botticelliano* or *Botticelli Triptych*. These three images do not seem to have much in common besides the artist and gallery, but Respighi leverages the contrasting subject matter to create a dynamic musical composition. He dedicated this work to Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a generous benefactor and patron who supported many other musicians and composers of the 20th century, including Respighi and his wife Elsa, a soprano.

The first movement, *La Primavera (Spring)*, personifies the figure of a woman surrounded by nature with young women, adorning flower wreaths, and dancing to bird songs. This movement opens with a flurry in the string and woodwind voices. The main theme can be heard in statements from the bassoon, oboe, and finally the ensemble as a whole. The lilting dance tune sings canonically throughout the orchestra. The movement carries musical influences from the Renaissance era, evoking celebratory festivities of Botticelli's time.

The second movement, *L'Adorazione dei Magi (The Adoration of the Magi)*, follows the story of the nativity in Bethlehem and the kings who traveled in caravans from the East to greet the birth of Jesus. This movement is heavily influenced and built around the well-known Advent hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Twisted statements of the hymn can be heard throughout the movement. Solo features of the pastoral-sounding bassoon and oboe present shepherd songs. The opening is mysterious and forlorn but develops into a more vibrant musical texture as the three Magi travel and eventually arrive at the manger bearing presents.

The final movement, *La nascita di Venere (The Birth of Venus)*, paints the musical picture of this most well-known work by Botticelli. The newly born goddess Venus stands, risen from the sea, in an oversized shell surrounded by wind and waves. The rhythmic melody presented by Respighi at the start of this movement represents the undulating waves of the ocean. From there, you'll hear improvisatory and unraveling statements made in the flute, oboe, and other various woodwind voices. The main hymn-like melody builds and rises throughout the orchestra, on top of the rhythmic waves, programmatically depicting this rise of Venus from the shell. The work concludes with a soft fading of the waves and rhythmic undulations as Venus departs back to the sea.

Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op. 24

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Serge Koussevitzky, on April 9, 1948. Eleanor Steber was the soprano soloist.

Samuel Barber was an American composer, pianist, conductor, and baritone. He grew up in the world of music, his aunt, Louise Homer, being a well-known contralto, and her husband, a song composer. His work *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, was composed in 1947 for soprano and orchestra. It is a glorious showcase of both his vocal and instrumental music. Barber had recently returned home from his time

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servicing in World War II and was faced with the failing health of both his father and his aunt. He was approached by vocalist Eleanor Steber to commission a work for voice and orchestra. He was inspired by a passage from James Agee's novel *A Death in the Family*, which later went on to win a Pulitzer Prize. This short essay, titled "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," is a conversation reflecting on summers spent by author Agee as a young boy at his family home in Tennessee. Agee claims to have written this essay as a stream of consciousness in less than 90 minutes, only minimally revising it once completed. It shifts between his train of thought as a child and his view as an adult, acknowledging the frailty of life.

This text immediately resonated with Barber, as it followed so closely with his experiences growing up, and he set it to music in one movement. Steber was also inspired by this choice of setting, stating, "That was exactly my childhood in Wheeling, West Virginia." While composing the piece, Barber's Aunt Louise passed away on May 6, 1947. His father, to whom he dedicated the composition, followed on August 12, 1947.

Throughout *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, Barber programmatically reflects the text in his melodic and harmonic texture, painting the atmosphere and emphasizing various words. The musical structure is free and flowing like the text itself. Rather than setting the entire text, Barber selected various passages of the essay to include in the work's libretto. The soprano's lines evoke the flow of conversation while backed by atmospheric sounds in the orchestra.

The piece begins with a beautiful and comforting theme in the woodwind voices. The triplet rhythms of the theme and in the accompaniment mirror the text as it describes people "rocking gently and talking gently" on their porches. It all depicts a quiet and casual evening. This is eventually interrupted by a surprising shift when we hear moaning, bellowing, and growling from the orchestra as "a streetcar raising its iron moan, stopping, belling, and starting, stertorous," enters the scene. This musical portrayal eventually fades as the streetcar passes. You continue to hear it in the distance. The focus then turns to the narrator's own parents. First draining and coiling the garden hose, then rocking once again on their own front porches. The family gathers to lie on quilts in the backyard as the narrator's mind wanders.

The comforting sounds of the rocking chairs and the "home" theme disappear as the narrator begins to contemplate mortality and the frailty of life. This train of thought ends in a heartfelt plea - a prayer to God to "bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father..." Following the prayer, the gentle rocking theme attempts to return, bringing with it that innocent happiness the narrator once had. While it never manages to return to its original form, the music does accomplish a peaceful acceptance. This monologue, which began as the innocent remembrance of childhood, ends with a reflection on the frailty of life and the realization that, while home may always be profound and fulfilling, it "will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am."

Beatles Songs

Luciano Berio (1925-2003)

Composed for Cathy Berberian's performance at the 1967 Venice Biennale.

Luciano Berio was an Italian composer known for his experimental compositions and his avant-garde style. His musical influences include the 20th-Century modernist style of Igor Stravinsky, symphonic compositions by Romantic composers Schubert, Brahms, and Mahler, and popular music, including the Beatles. Not only did he find the Beatles to be a musical inspiration but they also admired his works.

According to musicologist Walter Everett, Paul McCartney regularly attended concerts of Berio, John Cage, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. There is one documented encounter between Berio and McCartney

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from 1966. McCartney attended a lecture by Berio at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York and they briefly met afterward. This meeting inspired them both.

Luciano Berio was not the only one inspired by the Beatles, however. His daughter, Cristina, and his wife, the American soprano Cathy Berberian were both caught up in the Beatlemania. They both sang Beatles songs persistently. Cathy became so infatuated that she eventually decided she needed to add some of these songs to her recital repertoire. In 1966 she asked various composers, including her now ex-husband Luciano Berio, to arrange various Beatles songs for an upcoming performance at the 1967 Venice Biennale. Berio's arrangements used various combinations of winds and strings in a chamber setting with voice.

Berio's *Beatles Songs* consists of four movements for chamber orchestra - *Michelle I*, *Ticket to Ride*, *Yesterday*, and *Michelle II*. The piece is brief with a 10 minute duration. The movements contain references to various musical time periods while highlighting the Beatles original libretto.

Symphony No. 3, "The Camp Meeting"

Charles Ives (1874-1954)

Premiered by the New York Little Symphony on April 5, 1946, under the direction of Lou Harrison.

Charles Ives' *Symphony No. 3, "The Camp Meeting"* is a mix between classical forms of symphonic composition and the borrowing of materials like popular songs, war songs, religious hymns, dances, and folk tunes. The symphony is referential of Ives' childhood memories of religious camp meetings, where his father would conduct choral singing and hymn songs. Many of these songs can be heard within the movements of this symphony.

Ives composed this symphony between 1901 and 1904. At the time, he lived in New York and worked during the day in insurance. He composed in the evenings and on weekends supplementing his salary by playing the organ at local churches. It was finally premiered by the New York Little Symphony in 1945, a decade before Ives' death, and won a Pulitzer Prize for the composer in 1947.

The symphony consists of three movements, *Old Folks Gatherin'*, *Children's Day*, and *Communion*. It contains many references to an organ piece of Ives' from 1901. The first movement, *Old Folks Gatherin'*, utilizes three different hymn tunes. The four-part chorale structure typical of sacred vocal hymns can be found throughout the movement. The pacing of the various hymnal melodies represents the coming together of the "old folks." The movement ends with beautiful statements of the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" by the oboe and flute and a following, soft, stately closing in the strings and solo violin. The second movement, *Children's Day*, is a happy and animated allegro filled with quotations from various folk tunes. Ives leads the middle of the movement into a lilting march. The movement ends with an imitative coda of the opening tunes.

The third movement, *Communion*, is a largo and returning meditation on all of the hymns from the first movement. In this movement, the hymn "Woodworth" becomes more prominent in the second half and becomes the exclusive underlying hymn until the end of the work. Ives employs the quiet and distant sound of church bells which concludes the work.