Voices of Spring
Program Notes
March 16 - 18, 2012

Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, one of America's greatest patrons of the arts, went to see a dance recital by Martha Graham in 1942. So taken with the genius of the dancer-choreographer was Mrs. Coolidge that she offered to have three ballets specially composed for her. Miss Graham chose as composers of the music Darius Milhaud, Paul Hindemith and an American whose work she had admired for over a decade — Aaron Copland. In 1931, Miss Graham had staged Copland's *Piano Variations* as the ballet *Dithyramb*, and she was eager to have another dance piece from him, especially in view of his recent successes with *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*. She devised a scenario based on her memories of her grandmother's farm in turn-of-the-century Pennsylvania, and it proved to be a perfect match for the direct, quintessentially American style that Copland espoused in those years. Edwin Denby's description of the ballet's action from his review of the New York premiere in May 1945 was reprinted in the published score:

"[The ballet concerns] a pioneer celebration in spring around a newly built farmhouse in the Pennsylvania hills in the early part of the 19th century. The bride-to-be and the young farmer-husband enact the emotions, joyful and apprehensive, their new domestic partnership invites. An older neighbor suggests now and then the rocky confidence of experience. A revivalist and his followers remind the new householders of the strange and terrible aspects of human fate. At the end, the couple are left quiet and strong in their new house."

The premiere was set for October 1944 (in honor of Mrs. Coolidge's 80th birthday) in the auditorium of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the limited space in the theater allowed Copland to use a chamber orchestra of only thirteen instruments (flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano and nine strings). He began work on the score in June 1943 in Hollywood while writing the music for the movie *North Star*, and finished it a year later in Cambridge, where he was delivering the Horatio Appleton Lamb Lectures at Harvard. The plot, the music and most of the choreography were completed before a title for the piece was selected. Miss Graham was taken at just that time with the name of a poem by Hart Crane — *Appalachian Spring* — and she adopted it for her new ballet, though the content of the poem has no relation with the stage work.

Appalachian Spring was unveiled in Washington on October 30, 1944, and repeated in New York in May to great acclaim, garnering the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for Music and the New York Music Critics Circle Award as the outstanding theatrical work of the 1944-1945 season. Soon after its New York premiere, Copland revised the score as a suite of eight continuous sections for full orchestra by eliminating about eight minutes of music in which, he said, "the interest is primarily choreographic." On October 4, 1945, Artur Rodzinski led the New York Philharmonic in the premiere of this version, which has become one the best-loved and most familiar works of 20th-century music. In 1958, the composer arranged the suite for the original thirteen instruments (he allowed for some extra string players in this last version), thus restoring the intimacy and immediacy of his original conception to a concert adaptation of the music. *Appalachian Spring* thus exists in three versions: the original ballet (about 35 minutes in length), scored

for flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano and strings; the suite (25 minutes) for full orchestra; and the suite (also 25 minutes) for the reduced instrumental ensemble of the original ballet.

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Two important loves were continually evident in the life and music of Samuel Barber: the love of great literature and the love of the singing voice. Barber was a sensitive, cultured and discriminating reader (in English, French, German and Italian) of the best literature throughout his life, and he translated a number of those works into music. The *Overture to "The School for Scandal,"* one of his most frequently performed works, was, he noted, "suggested by Sheridan's comedy." *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* was based on the words of James Agee. Shelley, Emily Dickinson, William Butler Yeats, Matthew Arnold, James Joyce and A.E. Housman inspired other pieces. Barber came by his love of the human voice almost as part of his birthright. His aunt was the great Metropolitan Opera contralto Louise Homer, a frequent stage partner of Caruso, and her visits to the family home (with her husband, the art song composer Sidney Homer, who strongly encouraged his nephew's musical interests) and recital performances of some of Barber's early songs became a lasting influence on the young musician. When Barber enrolled at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia to undertake his professional training at age fourteen (he was the second student admitted to the newly founded school), he studied not only composition and piano, but also voice. He was good enough to give a number of professional recitals during his early years, and he even recorded his own *Dover Beach* with the Curtis String Quartet for RCA Victor in 1936. In his music, Barber integrated word and voice through his masterful handling of lyricism, structure and harmonic color. "He belongs to the conservative American composers … in that he paid considerable attention to his architectonic construction, was not afraid to yield to fluent melodic writing, preferred simplicity to complexity, and was ever in search of a deeply poetic idea," wrote musicologist David Ewen. Even more cogent was the evaluation by Barber's fellow composer Virgil Thomson: "Romantic music, predominantly emotional, embodying sophisticated workmanship and complete care. Barber's aesthetic position may be reactionary, but his melodic line sings and the harmony supports it."

In 1947, the American soprano Eleanor Steber commissioned a work from Barber that she could perform with Sergei Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Barber's father was terminally ill at the time, and the composer had recently been moved by a collection of prose and poetry by James Agee that recalled to him his youth and the happy times with his family in years gone by. Barber selected excerpts from Agee's anthology as the basis for his commissioned piece, and set them as *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. The work was dedicated to the "memory of my father." At the head of the score appears the poignant phrase, "We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child."

Knoxville: Summer of 1915, scored for small orchestra and soprano soloist, vividly captures the bittersweet nostalgia associated with the recall of the warm, simple, loving moments of youth. The soloist delivers the words in a nearly conversational manner, following closely their verbal rhythms and emotional inflections. The opening section ("It has become that time of evening") sways with gentle contentment, like a swing on a back porch. A mechanistic clatter intrudes itself ("A streetcar raising its iron moan") before the calm swinging returns ("Parents on porches"). The most intense stanzas of the work follow ("On the rough wet grass"), with their mingled feelings of love and loss. This haunting, quintessentially American work — as close a counterpart to Thornton Wilder's moving play *Our Town* as music has to offer — ends much as it began ("After a little I am taken in and put to bed"), with a return of

the gently rocking music of the opening.

... It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars. People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt: a loud auto: a quiet auto: people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival [summer] body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard, and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber. A streetcar raising its iron moan; stopping; belling and starting, stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks, the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts; the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter; fainting, lifting, lifts, faints foregone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose.

Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes ….

Parents on porches: rock and rock. From damp strings morning glories hang their ancient faces.

The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums.

On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there ... They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine, ... with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night. May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away.

After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her; and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home, but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am.

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September 12, 1840 — the day he married Clara Wieck — was a watershed in Robert Schumann's creative life. For years he and Clara had struggled to bring about their marriage against the will of her father, even taking him to court, before they could be united. The joy of their victory and the anticipation of their long-delayed life together inspired Schumann to explore whole new worlds of expression. For the decade before 1839, he had limited himself entirely to works for solo piano, though both he and Clara pined for grander things. "Sometimes I would like to smash my piano, it has become too narrow for my thoughts," wrote Robert on April 14th to Heinrich Dorn, his composition teacher. At about the same time, Clara told her diary, "It would be best if he composed for orchestra; his imagination cannot find sufficient

scope on the piano." His first important move away from the confines of the keyboard came during the year of his marriage, when he composed nearly 150 songs, including the splendid cycles *Dichterliebe*, *Frauenlieben und Leben* and *Liederkreis*. It was in December, the month that Clara first became pregnant, that Robert's spirit and imagination were finally inspired to undertake a symphony, born, according to its composer, "in a fiery hour."

In a fit of inspiration, Schumann began sketching his First Symphony in December 1840. (An attempt at a G minor Symphony in 1832 was abandoned after two movements, and later disowned.) Its genesis may be followed in the entries Clara and Robert made in the joint diary they kept during the early years of their marriage. Clara, January 14, 1841: "It is not my turn to keep the diary this week, but when a husband is composing a symphony, he must be excused from all other things." Clara, January 24th: "The symphony is nearly finished, and though I have not yet heard any of it, I am infinitely delighted that Robert has at last found the sphere for which his great imagination fits him." Clara, January 25th: "Today, Monday, Robert has about finished his Symphony; it has been composed mostly at night.... He calls it 'Spring' Symphony.... A spring poem by [Adolph] Böttger gave the first impulse to this creation." When the short score was finished the next day, Robert wrote, "Within the last few days I have completed, at least in outline, a labor which has kept me in a state of bliss, but also exhausted me. Think of it! A whole symphony — and more a Spring Symphony! I can myself scarcely believe it is finished." Robert, on February 20th, the day the orchestration was completed: "The Symphony has given me many happy hours. But now, after sleepless nights, comes exhaustion. I am like a young wife after a birth — so light, so happy, yet so sick and sore. My Clara understands this, and treats me with double consideration — a kindness which I will repay. But I would never come to the end, if I were to tell all that Clara has shown me during this time. I might have sought through millions without finding anyone who would treat me with such thoughtfulness and understanding." Clara added, "We enjoy such happiness as I have never before known. My father always made fun of so-called *domestic bliss*. How I pity those who do not know it! They are only half alive!" Robert found continuing orchestral inspiration in his new wife's love — from 1841 also date the original versions of D minor Symphony (presented to Clara on her birthday in September) and the Piano Concerto, and the *Overture, Scherzo and Finale*.

The B-flat Symphony was immediately put into rehearsal at the Leipzig Gewandhaus by its music director and Schumann's friend, Felix Mendelssohn, who seems to have offered his orchestrally inexperienced colleague some assistance with the intricate art of instrumentation. (Schumann also undertook a cursory study of the violin with Christoph Hilf at this time to broaden his knowledge of orchestral instruments.) The premiere was given on March 31, 1841 as part of a concert featuring Clara, one of the greatest pianists of the century, playing music by Mendelssohn, Chopin, Domenico Scarlatti, Thalberg and her husband. (Clara devoted much of her life, before and after the death of Robert in 1856, to the promulgation of his music. His reputation rests in no small part on her proselytizing.) So warmly was the new Symphony received that its composer boasted to a friend that it enjoyed a success "as no other had since Beethoven!"

Schumann seems to have taken the emotional milieu of the "Spring" Symphony from a largely rather glum poem by his friend Adolph Böttger (1815-1870) about the "Spirit of the Clouds, murky and heavy, flying with menace over land and sea." It was the poem's closing lines, however, that caught Schumann's imagination: "O turn, turn thy course, In the valley blooms the spring!" In October 1842 he sent a portrait of himself, painted by Kriehuber, to Böttger inscribed with the work's opening measures and the words,

"Beginning of a Symphony inspired by a poem of Adolph Böttger. To the poet, in remembrance of Robert Schumann." Though Schumann at first appended titles to each of the movements ("Spring's Beginning," "Evening," "Joyful Playing" and "Full" or, perhaps, "End of Springtime" — "*Voller Frühling*"), he soon dropped these sobriquets. In a letter to the then-eminent and now largely forgotten composer-conductor-violinist Ludwig Spohr on November 23, 1842, he noted, "I wrote the Symphony toward the end of the winter of 1841, and, if I may say so, in the vernal passion that sways men until they are very old, and surprises them again with each year. I do not wish to portray or to paint; but I believe firmly that the period [i.e., winter's end] in which the Symphony was produced influenced its form and character, and shaped it as it is." Such an attitude, of music expressing "feeling rather than painting," derived directly from the "Pastoral" Symphony of that most revered of all Romantics, Ludwig van Beethoven. (Perhaps not incidentally, Schumann wrote his B-flat Symphony with a steel pen he had found on Beethoven's grave during his 1838 pilgrimage to Vienna.) Schumann wrote further of his aesthetic purposes to the conductor Wilhelm Taubert, who was preparing for a performance of his First Symphony in Berlin in January 1843: "Could you infuse into your orchestra in the concert a sort of longing for the spring, which I had chiefly in mind when I wrote the piece in February 1841? The first entrance of the trumpets, this I should like to have sounded as though it were from high above, like unto a call to awakening; and then I should like, reading between the lines in the rest of the Introduction, how everything begins to grow green, how a butterfly takes wing; and, in the *Allegro*, how little by little all things appear that have to do with spring. True, these are fantastic thoughts, which came to me only after my work was finished. About the Finale I will tell you that I thought of it as a goodbye to spring." The distinguished music critic Mosco Carner wrote, "It is the intrusion of poetic ideas that gives Schumann's symphonic music its special place.... He opened to the symphony a world of Romantic imagery and lyricism which was at once new and personal."

In his fine book on *Schumann as Critic*, Leon Plantinga noted that the trumpet and horn summons which opens the work's slow introduction was probably influenced by the initial gesture of Schubert's magnificent C major Symphony ("The Great"), a score that Schumann had unearthed, brought to performance and pronounced "heavenly." Schumann originally wrote this motive a third lower, but discovered at the first rehearsal that the Gewandhaus brasses, which were not yet playing on the recently invented valved instruments, could produce two of the required notes only by stopping the bells with their hands, creating a muffled tone whose sound the composer compared to "a violent head cold" and which was woefully inappropriate for the desired stentorian effect. The transposition allows the notes to be played open and brilliantly, but it postpones immediate certainty about the music's tonality (though so does the opening motive of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, for that matter). There follows a vivacious exposition (with repeat) of the movement's thematic materials, including a main theme, derived from the melody of the introduction, and a wistful subsidiary phrase for woodwinds. A development, far more lovable than its four-squareness would seem to allow, ensues. After some grand chords spread through the full orchestra and a momentary silence, the recapitulation returns the themes of the exposition. An animated coda brings this lovely movement to a close.

The *Larghetto*, lyrical, long-limbed, rich in harmony, warm in sonority and impassioned in expression, is perhaps Schumann's most Romantic orchestral essay. The burnished sound of trombones leads directly to the *Scherzo* (with two trios), whose lusty theme is a transformation of that of the preceding movement. A joyous sonata-form finale, infused with a dancing, youthful *joie de vivre*, rounds out this beautiful Symphony.

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