

Program Notes for The New World Symphony

Apr. 30-May 2

The Unanswered Question CHARLES IVES (1874-1954)

Composed in 1906.

Premiered on May 11, 1946 in New York City, conducted by Elliott Carter.

"I must say that many of those things were started as kinds of studies, or rather trying out of sounds, beats, etc., usually by what is politely called, 'improvisations on the keyboard' — what my roommates called 'resident disturbances.' " So Charles Ives referred to the musical iconoclasm that he committed in the half dozen years after 1906, the same time that he was building the Ives and Myrick Agency into one of New York's most successful and lucrative insurance offices. (Ives is said to have instituted the first program for training insurance agents and to have invented the concept of estate planning.) His business assured his financial well-being and freed him to write whatever kind of music he pleased; and what pleased him were not "pretty, pretty little sounds" but "fine, strong" music that was like some metaphysical window onto a transcendental landscape. "I found I *could not* go on using familiar chords only," he said. "I *heard* something else."

Though much of Ives' music is modern and experimental in its harmony, texture and melodic manipulations, it is solidly rooted in the Romantic notion that music *means* something — that the notes are more than simply abstract, fleeting vibrations that momentarily titillate the ear but ultimately leave the listener untouched. He was convinced that music "comes directly out of the heart of the experience of life and living life." Some of Ives' works are like pasted-up scrapbooks of the musical bits and pieces that had stuck in his mind since his childhood in Danbury, Connecticut, and which give shape to a sort of collective American nostalgia for the vanished sweetness and security of the "good old days." Others of his compositions treat philosophical topics: *The Unanswered Question* posits nothing less than "the perennial question of existence;" the Fourth Symphony probes "the searching questions of What? and Why? which the spirit of man asks of life;" and the *Universe Symphony*, of which only some forty pages of disjunct and nearly illegible manuscript ever came into existence, sought to have all the people of the world gather together to hear the work performed by orchestras on the mountain tops and choirs in the valleys. Ives was a true visionary; "a man of noble thoughts, a brave and original genius," American composer and critic Virgil Thomson called him. "The future of music may not lie entirely with music itself," Ives wrote, "but rather in the way it encourages and extends, rather than limits, the aspirations and ideas of the people, in the way it makes itself a part of the finer things that humanity does and dreams of."

The Unanswered Question, subtitled "A Contemplation of Something Serious," is one of Ives' most visionary and most popular works. It was written in 1906 along with a companion piece, *Central Park in the Dark in the Good Old Summer Time* ("A Contemplation of Nothing Serious"), when Ives was trying out all manner of sound combinations in his music. *The Unanswered Question* comprises three distinct kinds of music, superimposed: a string chorale, an unchanging trumpet phrase and a chattering woodwind response. Ives assigned these unlikely partners the following philosophical roles: "The strings play *pianississimo* throughout with no change in tempo. They are to represent the 'Silence of the Druids — Who Know, See and Hear Nothing.' The trumpet intones 'The Perennial Question of Existence,' and states it in the same tone of voice each time. But the hunt for 'The Invisible Answer' undertaken by the flutes and other human beings, becomes gradually more active, faster and louder.... 'The Fighting Answerers,' as the time goes on and after a 'secret conference,' seem to realize a futility, and begin to mock 'The Question' — the strife is over for the moment. After they disappear, 'The Question' is asked for the last time, and 'The Silences' are heard beyond in 'Undisturbed Solitude.'" This turn-of-the-20th-century work continues to be disturbing, challenging and thought-provoking: "The world today makes us so aware of unanswered questions that the basic idea of the piece is easy to grasp," wrote musicologist Edward Downes.

Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta
BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

Composed in 1936.

Premiered on January 21, 1937 in Basle, conducted by Paul Sacher.

Bartók first met the Swiss conductor Paul Sacher in the summer of 1929, when they were both in Basle for performances by the International Society for Contemporary Music. In 1945, shortly after Bartók died, Sacher wrote this vivid description of his Hungarian colleague: "Whoever met Bartók, thinking of the rhythmic strength of his work, was surprised by his slight, delicate figure. He had the outward appearance of a fine-nerved scholar. Possessed of fanatical will and pitiless severity, and propelled by an ardent spirit, he affected inaccessibility and was reservedly polite. His being breathed light and brightness; his eyes burned with a noble fire. In the flash of his searching glance no falseness or obscurity could endure. If in performance an especially hazardous and refractory passage came off well, he laughed in boyish glee; and when he was pleased with the successful solution of a problem, he actually beamed. That meant more to him than forced compliments, which I never heard from his mouth."

Bartók returned frequently and gladly to Basle, and developed important associations in the city. The Basle chapter of the ISCM commissioned the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion from him in 1937. A year later, when the rise of the Nazis to power made life unendurable for him in Budapest (during the summer of 1937 he and Kodály, who had done more to unearth the treasury of Hungarian folksong than anyone else in that country's history, were accused by Nazi sympathizers in the press of an "insufficiency of nationalism"), one of his greatest fears was that the manuscripts of some of his recent works would be destroyed in the imminent hostilities. He cataloged several of them, including his original scores for the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, the *Mikrokosmos*, the Second Rhapsody, the Forty-Four Duos, the *Twenty Hungarian Songs* for Voice and Piano and the children's choruses, and sent them to his friend and hostess in Basle, Mrs. Oscar Müller-Widmann, who guarded them until the end of the War. In the summer of 1939, Sacher, realizing the toll the political upheaval in Hungary was taking on Bartók's creativity, put at his disposal a chalet at Saanen in the massif of Gruyère, near Fribourg in Switzerland, and commissioned him to write a new work for his chamber orchestra in Basle. Within just two weeks, Bartók had completed the Divertimento for Strings.

When Paul Sacher founded the Basle Chamber Orchestra in 1926, one of his purposes was to foster the performance of new music. To that end, he commissioned works from Stravinsky, Honegger, Strauss, Hindemith and other modern masters, and presented them for the first time on his concert series. In 1936, in honor of the orchestra's tenth anniversary, he asked Bartók to write a piece, and Bartók responded with what has come to be regarded as one the greatest works of the 20th century — the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. Though Bartók gave the celesta nominal prominence, he treated it as an equal to the other keyboard and percussion instruments, which include side drum with and without snares, cymbals, gong, bass drum, timpani, xylophone, harp and piano. Bartók specified in the score that these instruments be placed in the center of the stage, with the strings, divided into two antiphonal groups, located on either side. (The resulting spatial effects are an integral part of the piece, and can be fully appreciated only in performance and not in broadcasts or recordings.)

The *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* draws on two of Bartók's most characteristic compositional traits: the rigorous integration of form and the folksong inspiration of themes, harmonies and rhythmic devices. The first movement is a dense, chromatic fugue whose main subject shows the short, arch-shaped phrases, inflected modality and frequent returns to a central pitch encountered in the Hungarian peasant songs and dances to whose study Bartók devoted so many years of his life. This fugue, a modern revival of that most tightly integrated of all musical forms, is built entirely from its opening motive, undeflected by counter-subjects or episodes. The music starts quietly in the violas (on the note A), expands in tonal and dynamic range until it reaches a climax at the movement's mid-point (on E-flat), and then recedes to its mysterious origin. (Careful listening reveals that the motive has a rising shape in the movement's first half,

and a descending one in the denouement.) As with many of the works of Bartók's maturity, the movement shows an overall symmetry of form, coming to a center point and reversing its progress, mirror-like, to move to the end. One critic has compared this music's structure to the opening and closing of a fan.

Bartók's penchant for structural integration informs the thematic material of the second movement, a sonata form whose chromatic opening melody is derived from the fugue subject. The movement's second theme, begun by the violins after a silence (a technique Bartók borrowed from Mozart), is built from a skipping motive in dotted rhythms. The development is richly contrapuntal (including a fugato section), enlivened by frequent meter changes and intriguing in its dialogue-antiphonal exchanges.

Filled with undefined twitterings and vague rustlings, the following *Adagio* is one of Bartók's finest "night music" pieces, described by Lawrence Gilman as a "mystical nocturne, elemental and earth-born." Like the opening fugue, it, too, is symmetrical in form (A-B-C-B-A), with each section demarcated by a tiny recall of the fugue theme. The "A" section contains high-pitched taps on the xylophone, timpani slides and a snapping, elaborately decorated melody from the viola. "B" is based on a winding melody suspended high in the violins, supported by a tremulous accompaniment in the low strings and rippling figurations from the celesta, harp and piano. The central, "C" section, during which the movement's climax is achieved, employs a wide-ranging motive in a steady rhythmic gait. Of this intense, introspective movement John McCabe wrote, "Formally... it demands a fast developmental follow-up, but emotionally one feels one would like to go away and not be disturbed for a while, to think about the implications of this haunting music."

The finale, like the folk dances that Bartók knew so well, is built in several sections. After a few bars of prelude strumming, the vigorous main theme, yet another variant of the fugue subject, is presented by the violins and violas. This opening theme returns, in rondo fashion, throughout the movement to enclose the various formal episodes. The closing pages contain several tempo changes, coy and flirtatious in nature, before a brief, vivacious return of the opening theme brings this modern masterwork to its finish.

"What makes the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* so remarkable a composition," wrote John McCabe, "is not merely its intellectual concentration of thought, formidable though this is, but the whole world of experience gained in its pages. It is music of universal passion, however apparently intellectual its formation."

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95, "From the New World" **ANTONÍN DVORÁK (1841-1904)**

Composed in 1892-1893.

Premiered on December 16, 1893 in New York, conducted by Anton Seidl.

When Antonín Dvorák, aged 51, arrived in New York on September 27, 1892 to direct the new National Conservatory of Music, both he and the institution's founder, Mrs. Jeanette Thurber, expected that he would help to foster an American school of composition. He was clear and specific in his assessment: "I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. They can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States.... There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot find a thematic source here." Dvorák's knowledge of this music came from Henry Thacker Burleigh, an African-American song writer and student of his who sang the traditional melodies to the enthralled composer. Burleigh later recalled, "There is no doubt that Dr. Dvorák was very deeply impressed by the Negro spirituals from the old plantation. He just saturated himself in the spirit of those old tunes, and then invented his own themes."

The "New World" Symphony was not only Dvorák's way of pointing toward a truly American musical idiom but also a reflection of his feelings about his own country. "I should never have written the Symphony as I have," he said, "if I hadn't seen America," but he added in a later letter that it was "genuine Bohemian music." There is actually a reconciliation between these two seemingly contradictory statements, since the

characteristics that Dvorák found in Burleigh's indigenous American music — pentatonic (five-note) scales, modal minor keys with a lowered seventh degree, rhythmic syncopations, frequent returns to the central key note — are common to much folk music throughout the world, including that of his native Bohemia. Because his themes for the "New World" Symphony drew upon these cross-cultural qualities, to Americans, they sound American; to Czechs, they sound Czech.

The "New World" Symphony is unified by the use of a motto theme that occurs in all four movements. This bold, striding phrase, with its arching contour, is played by the horns as the main theme of the sonata-form opening movement, having been foreshadowed (also by the horns) in the slow introduction. Two other themes are used in the first movement: a sad, dance-like melody for flute and oboe that exhibits folk characteristics, and a brighter tune, with a striking resemblance to *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, for the solo flute.

Many years before coming to America, Dvorák had encountered Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, which he read in a Czech translation. The great tale remained in his mind, and he considered making an opera of it during his time in New York. That project came to nothing, but *Hiawatha* did have an influence on the "New World" Symphony: the second movement was inspired by the forest funeral of Minnehaha; the third, by the dance of the Indians at the feast. That the music of these movements has more in common with the old plantation songs than with the chants of native Americans is due to Dvorák's mistaken belief that African-American and Indian music were virtually identical.

The second movement is a three-part form (A–B–A), with a haunting English horn melody (later fitted with words by William Arms Fisher to become the folksong-spiritual *Goin' Home*) heard in the first and last sections. The recurring motto here is pronounced by the trombones just before the return of the main theme in the closing section. The third movement is a tempestuous scherzo with two gentle, intervening trios providing contrast. The motto theme, played by the horns, dominates the coda.

The finale employs a sturdy motive introduced by the horns and trumpets after a few introductory measures in the strings. In the Symphony's closing pages, the motto theme, *Goin' Home* and the scherzo melody are all gathered up and combined with the principal subject of the finale to produce a marvelous synthesis of the entire work — a look back across the sweeping vista of Dvorák's musical tribute to America.