

Quad City Symphony Orchestra
PROGRAM NOTES
Masterworks I: From Conflict to Courage

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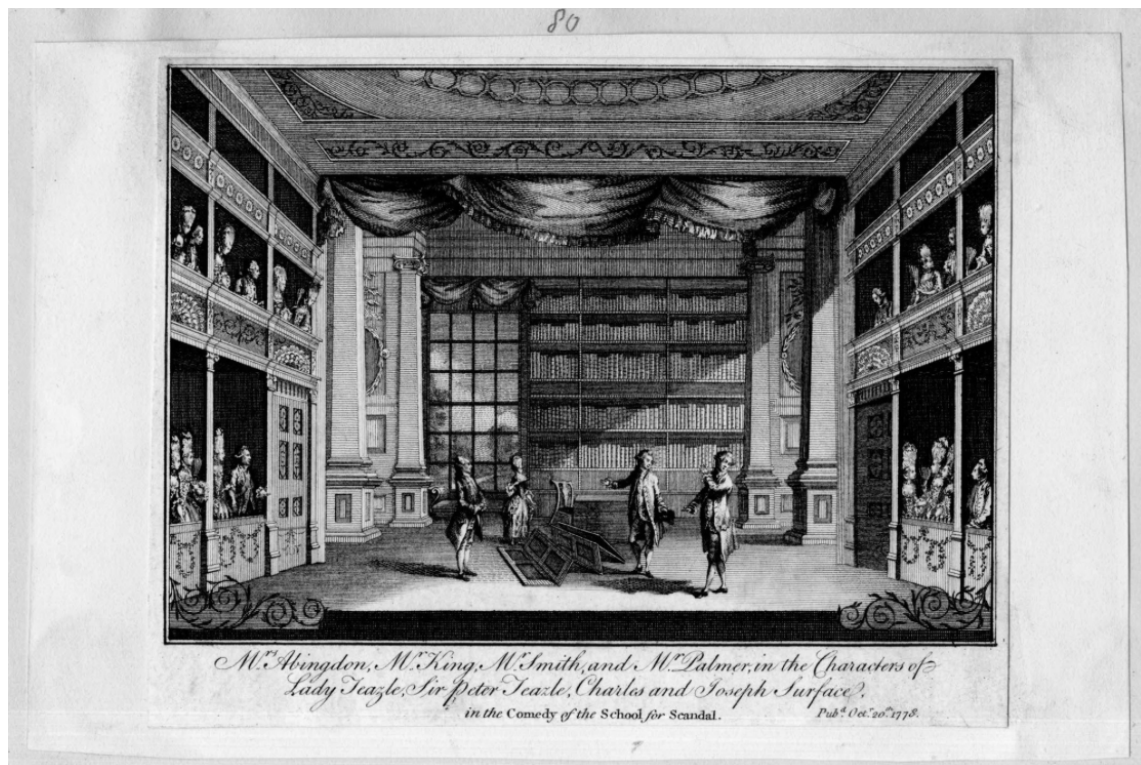
SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)
Overture to *The School for Scandal*

Instrumentation: Piccolo, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, English horn, 2 Clarinets, Bass clarinet, 2 Bassoons, 4 Horns, 3 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Tuba, Timpani, Percussion, Celesta, Harp, and Strings.

Premiere: August 30, 1933, the Philadelphia Orchestra, Alexander Smallens, conductor.

QCSO Performance History: Barber's overture has been programmed on Masterworks programs four times previously: first conducted by Charles Gigante in 1963, then twice by James Dixon (1975, 1982), and most recently by Donald Schelicher (2003).

Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 1777 comedy *The School for Scandal* begins with heroine Lady Sneerwell praising the "talent" and "industry" of Mrs. Clackitt, London's most prolific gossip. "True, madam, and [she] has been tolerably successful in her day," replies her co-conspirator, Snake. "To my knowledge, she has been the cause of six matches being broken off, and three sons being disinherited; of four forced elopements, and as many close confinements; nine separate maintenances, and two divorces." And thus proceeds this classic British comedy of manners, with various



fictitious aristocrats sabotaging each other's reputations and livelihoods, all in good fun.

A century and a half later, Sheridan's comedy caught the eye of Samuel Barber, still a student at the Curtis Institute of Philadelphia and yet unknown outside of conservatory circles. Since Barber's overture was not written for any particular production of *The School for Scandal*, we can wonder why he found it an arresting subject for his first orchestral work. It certainly seems an unlikely choice: young Samuel Barber was reserved and morose, with a personality more like *Adagio for Strings* than the effervescent exuberance of this overture. And even though he was literary-minded as a young man, we might have guessed that he would be drawn to something with more gravity than an uproarious comedy about gleeful slander; indeed, his other work from his youth based in literature was the gloomy and grandiose *Music for a Scene from Shelley* based on Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. Further, his upbringing in upper-middle-class suburbia was a setting quite different from the mannered yet socially ruthless world of the British aristocracy in the eighteenth century. Thus, while we don't have any specific accounts of why *The School for Scandal* was Barber's subject of choice, we can at least guess that its appeal to the young man was precisely that it was so starkly different than his own temperament, background and experience.

Barber completed his work in 1931 and approached the conductor of the student orchestra at Curtis, none other than the legendary Fritz Reiner, who expressed no interest in performing it. Eventually Barber's reputation generated enough buzz in Philadelphia that the work was premiered two years

later in a late summer concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra, though Barber was not able to attend the performance as he was studying in Europe at the time. With Barber's rising fame, the overture would eventually become one of the most popular American "concert openers", a perfect appetizer of wit, brevity, variety and tunefulness.



ANDREA CASARRUBIOS (b. 1988)
Seven

Instrumentation: solo cello.
QCSO Premiere.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic will remain an unforgettable time for all of us who lived through it together. Remember: on the third weekend of March 2020, the QCSO was performing Verdi's Requiem with 165 singers in the Adler Theatre and Centennial Hall; mere days later, such a performance would be unthinkable, and would remain so for years. The feeling of that moment – the uncertainty, the confusion, the feeling of being in tailspin – was for most of us completely unprecedented.

We also, of course, remember the good-hearted efforts of musicians and management to make the best of the lockdown era. We had Brady Bunch-style performances of Beethoven symphonies on Zoom, we heard

masked outdoor performances of strings-only repertoire, and we binge-watched streaming operas from the Met, jealous of those naive audiences living in simpler times. In concert-starved days that seemed to last forever, much was done, with great goodwill, to help all of us who love music to get through the uncertainty.

Ultimately, though such efforts were laudable and certainly provided comfort to musicians and their audiences during the darkest days of the pandemic, in hindsight such lemonade-out-of-lemons initiatives may remind us of how we coped, but fail to capture the true spirit of that time. The real artistic fruit of the pandemic, and those works that most aptly capture the ethos of living with Covid-19, are works for solo instruments like Andrea Casarrubios's *SEVEN* for solo cello.

Ms. Casarrubios writes:

Commissioned by Astral Artist Tommy Mesa for his project Songs of Isolation, *SEVEN* is a tribute to the essential workers during the global COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to those who lost lives and suffered from the crisis. Written in Manhattan, the piece ends with seven bell-like sounds, alluding to New York's daily 7 PM tribute during the lockdown, the moment when New Yorkers clapped from their windows, connecting with each other and expressing appreciation for those on the front lines.

JESSIE MONTGOMERY (b. 1981)

Divided

Instrumentation: Solo cello and strings.

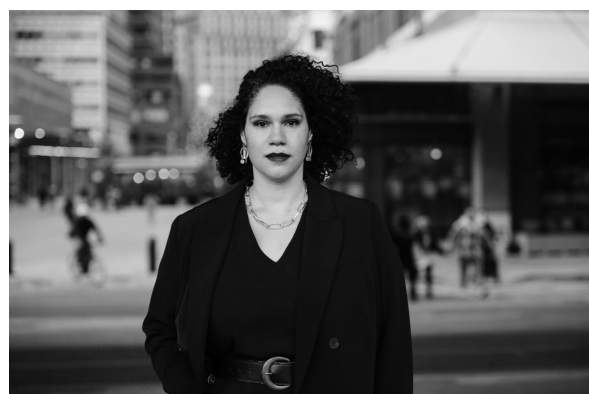
Premiere: October 13, 2022, Tommy Mesa as soloist with the Sphinx Virtuosi, Carnegie Hall.

QCSO Premiere.

Over the last decade, violinist and composer Jessie Montgomery has emerged as a leading voice of American music: her music has been performed by virtually every American orchestra, and she has landed important posts at many important cultural institutions, including the Sphinx Organization, The New School and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She gained her trademark artistic sensibility – energetic, socially-conscious, and colorful – growing up in Manhattan as the child of two performing artists.

About *Divided*, Montgomery writes:

Divided for solo cello and orchestra is a response to the social and political unrest that has plagued our generation in the recent past. Specifically, the sense of helplessness that people seem to feel amid a world of that seems to be in constant crisis, whether it is over racial injustice, sexual or religious discrimination, greed and poverty, or climate change.



In a world that is so fast-paced, where all of these desperate realities have been unveiled by the internet with constant visual bombardment to the human psyche, how do we regain control and find beauty among the chaos? How can we stack good actions over the negative reactions that easily emerge out of conflict? The cello is a voice crying out to be heard, in chorus with a few, passionate and unrelenting, with the orchestra performing a gritty accompaniment.

Divided was co-commissioned by the Sphinx Organization, New World Symphony, Inc. and Carnegie Hall.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Symphony No. 5 in D minor, Op. 47

Instrumentation: Piccolo, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, E-flat Clarinet, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, Contrabassoon, 4 Horns, 3 Trumpets, 3 Trombones, Tuba, Timpani, Percussion, Harp, Piano/Celesta, and Strings.

Premiere: November 21, 1937, Leningrad, by the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, Yevgeny Mravinsky conducting.

QCSO Performance History: This is the sixth series of performances in Tri-City/QCSO history. James Dixon led the first performances in 1971, as well as in 1982 and 1992. Donald Schelicher began the 2000-2001 season with Shostakovich 5, and Mark Russell Smith conducted the most recent performances, in 2009.

Dmitri Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 is perhaps the most politicized piece of classical music in history. Few works are more tightly-interwoven with a specific political moment, and with so little said by the

composer about the work's genesis and meaning, it has become a canvas on which to project multitudinous interpretations of Soviet history, of the place of music in society, and of principles of artistic freedom.

At its 1937 premiere, Shostakovich's symphony was subtitled "A Soviet Artist's Response to Just Criticism". The criticism in question was a 1936 review of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* published in *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. *Lady Macbeth* had received its premiere in 1934 to great critical acclaim, even receiving the praise of certain Party leaders as a genuine example of Soviet art. But, as is often the case in totalitarian regimes, the powers-that-be reserved, and frequently exercised, the right to change their minds. After Joseph Stalin attended a performance of *Lady Macbeth*, someone from the Party – it may have been Stalin himself – wrote the now-notorious *Pravda* column excoriating Shostakovich, titled "Muddle instead of Music."

The author begins patronizingly. "At no time and in no other place has the composer had a more appreciative audience. The people expect good songs, but also good instrumental works, and good operas." In such an artistic environment, the author laments that Shostakovich, "instead of hearing serious criticism, which could have helped him in his future work, hears only enthusiastic compliments." The author goes on to describe in excruciating detail the experience of listening to *Lady Macbeth*. "From the first minute, the listener is shocked by deliberate dissonance, by a confused stream of sound. Snatches of melody, the beginnings of a musical phrase, are drowned, emerge again, and disappear in a grinding and squealing

roar. To follow this 'music' is most difficult; to remember it, impossible... The singing on the stage is replaced by shrieks. If the composer chances to come upon the path of a clear and simple melody, he throws himself back into a wilderness of musical chaos – in places becoming cacophony."

The author seems befuddled by Shostakovich's artistic obstinance. "All this is not due to lack of talent, or lack of ability to depict strong and simple emotions in music." He is aware of Shostakovich's great skill, which to the author makes the music that much more offensive. "And all this is coarse, primitive and vulgar. The music quacks, grunts, and growls, and suffocates itself..." And finally, the author provides the most damning evidence possible: "Lady Macbeth is having great success with bourgeois audiences abroad... Is it not explained by the fact that it tickles the perverted taste of the bourgeois with its fidgety, neurotic music?"

Shostakovich's immediate response to the review was to withdraw his Symphony No. 4, already in rehearsals, and to attempt alter his musical language in future works so as to appease Party leaders. This was essentially an impossible task – expectations for Soviet artists were constantly shifting, and only the most obsequious completely avoided censure. Some historians have alleged that Shostakovich was targeted not due to the specific musical and dramatic features criticized in *Pravda*, but rather simply because he was the most celebrated, most gifted musician of his generation. Censuring him sent a message to all artists, and in turn all citizens: no one, no matter how talented, was above the scrutiny of Stalin. And to meet with Stalin's disfavor was not simply to be

humiliated, but to face the real possibility of imprisonment or execution.

Thus Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 is his attempt to write for his life, and this attempt succeeded. The work was a tremendous success both with audiences (the actual people) and Party leaders (who claimed to speak for the people) and led to his rehabilitation in Soviet society. From an objective point of view, a major difference between this symphony and prior works is the general moderation of Shostakovich's characteristic musical humor, which could be sardonic, biting, and caustic. But other than that, it's difficult to pinpoint any real musical contrasts from his prior works that should have redeemed him so completely in Stalin's eyes. In truth, it was nothing in the music, but rather the performative response to "just criticism" – the composer's willingness to bow to Party authority – that saved his career, and quite possibly his life.



