

Quad City Symphony Orchestra

PROGRAM NOTES

Masterworks II: Conflict

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SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)

Adagio for Strings

Instrumentation: String orchestra.

Premiere: *Adagio for Strings* was first performed as the third movement of Barber's String Quartet in B minor, Op. 11, on December 14, 1936 in Rome. As a stand-alone arrangement for string orchestra, the work premiered just under two years later, on November 5, 1938, in a radio broadcast by the NBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Arturo Toscanini.

QCSO Performance History: The QCSO has performed *Adagio for Strings* four times previously: in 1956, 1961, 1979, and 2008.

In classical music, we have warhorses (e.g., Beethoven's Symphony No. 5), tear-jerkers (e.g., Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2), and even a few warhorse tear-jerkers (e.g., "Nimrod" from *Enigma Variations*). And then, in a class of its own, we have Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, the most-often-performed work of American classical music and the most ubiquitous tear-jerker in the modern world. Aside from its use in concerts, it has been often employed to underscore heart-rending cinematic moments in films as varied as David Lynch's *Elephant Man* and Oliver Stone's *Platoon*. It's also much-used as a means for expressing civic grief at national tragedies, from the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (who loved the work) to commemorations of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Most recently, it has become a favorite in dance clubs via

electronic remixes. Whatever the context, Barber's endless staircases of melody, his weighty and inconclusive harmonic progressions, and the intense pathos of a room full of vibrato never fail to elicit a highly emotional audience response.

The work is an arrangement of the slow movement of Barber's String Quartet in B minor, written when the composer was 25 and already a rising star in the American classical scene. Since its premiere, the *Adagio* has appeared in a seemingly infinite number of arrangements, including a choral setting by the composer himself, using the text of the *Agnus Dei*. His own reaction to the work's infamy was apparently somewhat ambivalent. "They always play that piece," he said in a radio interview. "I wish they'd play some of my other pieces."

Adagio for Strings Listening Guide

♪ **TEXTURE:** Although there are typically five sections of strings in the orchestra (first violins, second violins, violas, cellos, and basses), in this work Barber often uses the technique of **divisi**, or dividing the sections into smaller subsections in order to include more than five distinct parts.

♪ **HARMONY:** Most of this work is in the key of B-flat minor (five flats), which has a particular color when played on

string instruments: players make very little if any use of **open strings**, and the notes they do play lack **sympathetic resonance** with the any unsounding open strings. Following the piece's highly dramatic climax, Barber removes all the flats for a brief passage; though this music is very soft, see if you can notice an increase in natural resonance from the instruments in this moment.

♫ **RHYTHM/MELODY:** Pay attention to when the stair-step melodies seem to come to a resting point. In one sense, the rhythms of these melodies are simple, made up of nothing but evenly spaced quarter notes. However, Barber will frequently and unexpectedly change **meter** by adding or subtracting beats. When you combine these metrical ambiguities with the use of **rubato**, or flexibility in tempo, a good part of the tension of this work can be attributed to the unpredictability of its rhythm.

♫ **TEXTURE:** Listen for Barber's patient use of **polyphony**, or multiple simultaneous melodies. The piece begins with a single melody in the violins accompanied by simple chords, but after its first statement, listen for how the violins continue their melody even as the violas take up the original tune underneath.

JOHN ADAMS (b. 1947)

The Wound-Dresser

Instrumentation: Solo baritone voice; 2 flutes (first doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, clarinet, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 1 trumpet (doubling piccolo trumpet), timpani, keyboard sampler, and strings.

Premiere: *The Wound-Dresser* was premiered by Sanford Sylvan, baritone, and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra on February 24, 1989, with the composer conducting.

QCSO Premiere.

The composer writes:

Walt Whitman spent the better part of the Civil War years in Washington, D.C., living in a series of small, unfurnished rooms, all the time supported by the meager salary of a federal clerkship. His sole, consuming passion was his self-appointed task of ministering to the tens of thousands of sick and maimed soldiers who crowded the hospitals in the surrounding area, many of them little more than unheated and unventilated canvas tents hurriedly constructed by the unprepared Army of the Potomac. Virtually every day, barring his own illness or ever-increasing exhaustion, Whitman rose early and went to the hospitals, going from ward to ward to visit with the sick and wounded young men. For those who were unable to do so, he wrote letters home. For others he provided small gifts of fruit, candy or tobacco. He dressed the wounds of the maimed and the amputees and often sat up throughout the night with the most agonizing cases, almost all of whom he knew on a first-name basis. It was surely no poetic exaggeration when he later said that during these years many a young soldier had died in his, Walt Whitman's, arms.

Because the scope of his work is so grand and inclusive, and because he yearned throughout his life to embrace the entire universe in his poems, it has been tempting for succeeding generations to appropriate Whitman for any number of causes or points of view. For instance, one would easily assume the poet's sentiments to be fervently anti-war. In fact this was not the case, as the poems in *Drum-Taps* reveal. This slim volume, the only literary work he allowed himself to compose during the war years, is remarkably honest in that it expresses not just the horror and degradation of war, but also the thrill of battle and the almost manic exhilaration of one caught up in a righteous cause. Whitman hated war—this particular war and all wars—but he was no pacifist. Like his idol, Lincoln, he never ceased to believe in the Union's cause and in the dreadful necessity of victory.

The Wound-Dresser is a setting for baritone voice and orchestra of a fragment from the poem of the same name. As always with Whitman, it is in the first person, and is the most intimate, most graphic and most profoundly affecting evocation of the act of nursing the sick and the dying that I know of. It is also astonishingly free of any kind of hyperbole or amplified emotion, yet the detail of the imagery is of a precision that could only be attained by one who had been there.

The Wound-Dresser is not just about the Civil War; nor is it just about young men dying (although it is locally about both). It strikes me as a statement about human compassion of the kind that is acted out on a daily basis, quietly and unobtrusively and unselfishly and unfailingly. Another poem in the same volume states its theme in other

words: "Those who love each other shall become invincible..."

—JOHN ADAMS
December 22, 1988

TEXTS

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Excerpts from *The Wound-Dresser*

Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be filled with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and filled again.

I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
One turns to me his appealing eyes – poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)
The crush'd head I dress, (poor crazed hand tear not the bandage away,)
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through examine,

Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,

(Come sweet death! be persuaded, O beautiful death!

In mercy come quickly.)

From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,

I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,

Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side falling head,

His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the bloody stump, And has not yet look'd on it.

I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep, But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,

And the yellow-blue countenance see.

I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,

Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening, so offensive, While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.

I am faithful, I do not give out, The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,

These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame.)

Thus in silence in dreams' projections, Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,

The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,

I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,

Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,

(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested, Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

The Wound-Dresser Listening Guide

♪ **TIMBRE:** Like in Barber's *Adagio*, this work has a near-absence of **percussive** sounds in the orchestra. Not only are there no percussion instruments (besides the gently-rumbling timpani), but the instruments play mostly **legato**, or in a smoothly-connected manner. This creates a warm and often eerie orchestral color, which is enhanced by atmospheric timbres from the synthesizer.

♪ **TEXT-SETTING:** Adams employs a very straightforward technique of turning Whitman's text into a melodic line for the singer; the setting is almost completely **syllabic**, or "one-note-per-syllable" (the opposite of this is **melismatic**, with many notes per syllable, e.g., "Rejoice Greatly" from Handel's *Messiah*). The text rhythms are also very similar to the rhythm of human speech; this allows for maximum intelligibility for the audience. Such rhythms are difficult to synchronize with the orchestra, so Adams rarely has the orchestra and singer perform the same rhythm simultaneously.

♪ **ORCHESTRATION:** Notice how Adams introduces the instruments of the orchestra very softly and very gradually; notice also how instrumental solos (particularly on the violin and trumpet) tend to mark off the piece's major sections. Listen also for the change in color between the regular trumpet and super-high **piccolo trumpet**, played by the same player.

♩ **FORM:** Adams's piece, like most of Whitman's poetry, follows a meandering, free form. Frequent, often imperceptible changes of tempo give the work a drifting, often hypnotic feel; a performance usually lasts around 20 minutes, but can seem much shorter given the work's spellbinding character.

DMITRI DMITRIYEVICH SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-1975)

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 60

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (second doubling alto flute, third doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets (third doubling E-flat clarinet), bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 8 horns, 6 trumpets, 6 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, 2 harps, and strings.

Premiere: March 5, 1942; Kuybyshev (now Samara), Soviet Union; Bolshoi Theatre Orchestra; Samuil Samosud, cond.

QCSO Premiere.

In ordering the siege of Leningrad, Hitler had one objective: total destruction. The invading Nazi army began its attack on the city in early September 1941 with the ultimate aim of levelling the city to the ground and starving out its three million residents. The siege, perhaps the deadliest attack on a single city in the history of the world, would ultimately last almost two and a half years, resulting in the deaths of over a million Russian soldiers and over half a million civilians.

Living in Leningrad at the time was Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer who was always under siege in one sense or another. Having survived any number of early career pitfalls, most especially the Communist Party's attack on his work in the mid-1930s, he now faced another very immediate threat in the

advancing Nazi army. Whereas some composers might react to such terrifying adversity by withdrawing from their art, Shostakovich was determined to continue creating despite the dangerous circumstances. Having begun his Symphony No. 7 before the siege, he worked on it diligently amid his other responsibilities, which included shuffling his family to bomb shelters and serving on the Leningrad Conservatory firefighter brigade. The work was finished by the end of 1941, by which time Shostakovich had been evacuated from his native city.

The first performance was given in March 1942 by the orchestra of the Bolshoi Theatre of Moscow, at that time exiled alongside Shostakovich in Kuybyshev. Later that month the work was performed in Moscow, and then, like a covert wartime communique, it was whisked away on microfilm for premiere in London in June and New York in July. The latter performance, by the NBC Symphony Orchestra and Arturo Toscanini, was broadcast by radio to an enormous and largely receptive American audience, who found sympathy with its apparent anti-Nazi spirit. But not everyone who tuned in loved the work. Among its listeners was the expatriate Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, who found the symphony so obnoxious that he parodied it in a particularly salty passage of his *Concerto for Orchestra*, proving once again that there's no accounting for taste.

As with all matters in Shostakovich's life and work, the composer's expressive intentions, particularly in the *Bolero*-like "invasion" theme of the first movement, have been discussed endlessly and contentiously. Did it represent, as was first widely believed, the encroaching *Wehrmacht*? Or was it actually a covert reference to the inexorable grip of

Joseph Stalin, as was suggested later by several of Shostakovich's friends? Intriguing though they be, these questions are ultimately unanswerable. The composer himself was infamously elusive when asked about concrete symbolism in his work, and in any case so grand a symphony, like Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, is powerful enough to sustain more than one meaning.

Shostakovich Symphony No. 7 Listening Guide

First movement: Allegretto

♫ **FORM:** Things begin conventionally enough, with two "theme groups", neither of them particularly striking. But then, a quiet drum cadence begins and we hear a tidy little melody accompanied by string pizzicato. In a passage often compared to Ravel's *Bolero*, this drum cadence and little tune evolve into a full-on military assault.

♫ **TIMBRE:** At the climax of this militaristic "invasion" of the first movement, listen for the high, loud, and brash chords in the trumpets. This effect, called **flutter-tonguing**, is made when the player makes a rolled *r* into the mouthpiece.

♫ **MELODY:** After the invasion has passed, listen for the clarinet's and bassoon's long, somewhat disoriented solos, with unpredictable changes in time signature. The bassoon solo even includes a measure with the time signature of 13/4!

♫ **HARMONY:** Notice how the strings provide a warm reorientation after all the chaos and confusion. One of the reasons the strings sound so comforting here may be because they have resettled us into the home key of C major.

Second movement: Moderato (poco allegretto)

♫ **TIMBRE:** Shostakovich's works are a treasure trove of woodwind solos, and this movement has some unique ones. Listen for the unusually high solo in the **English horn** (like the oboe, but longer and with a bulbous bell), the end of which is underscored by the ponderous contrabassoon. Listen also for the solo on the high-pitched **E-flat clarinet**, sometimes called a "piccolo clarinet."

Third movement: Adagio

♫ **FORM:** Notice how this slow movement includes several false endings, and (like the first movement) includes a militaristic interruption.

Fourth movement: Allegro non troppo

♫ **HARMONY:** Having begun his symphony in C major, Shostakovich begins his last movement in C minor; this is basically the opposite of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which begins fatefully in C minor and ends triumphantly in C major. Although Shostakovich eventually finds his way back to end the symphony in C major, you will find his "triumph" to be of a very different quality than Beethoven's.

♫ **TEMPO:** If one thing unites most of the many tempos in this long symphony it is their moderation; even the shocking climax of the first movement is at a tempo of medium speed. Thus this last movement provides the first genuinely fast music in the symphony.

♫ **FORM:** In the last moments of this work, Shostakovich builds a huge crescendo; as the chords shift below, he repeats a four-step-up melodic motive many times in the high instruments. This kind of much-repeated motive is called an **ostinato**.