

CHARLOTTESVILLE  
SYMPHONY

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

PROGRAM NOTES FOR NOVEMBER 18 & 19, 2017

**Second Essay for Orchestra, Op. 17b**

**Samuel Barber**

**Born 9 March, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania**

**Died 23 January, 1981 in New York City**

*Approximate duration 10 minutes*

The essay is a flexible literary term with origins in the Renaissance. It can be a critical discussion, as in John Dryden's "Essay of Dramatic Poesy" (1668) or a philosophical treatise, as John Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," (1690) which posits the empirical origin of ideas. Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man" (1734) is his best known poem, and the great French moralist Michel de Montaigne's two volumes of *Essais* (1580 and 1588) ramble across various topics affecting humans and human nature. Closer to our own time, Ralph Waldo Emerson published two series of essays in 1841 and 1844, touching on history, love, manners, politics and nature. We read brief essays almost daily on the editorial page of our newspapers, and virtually all of us penned a few essays in English classes.

Merriam-Webster's *Encyclopedia of Literature* defines an essay as:

An analytic, interpretative, or critical literary composition usually much shorter and less systematic and formal than a dissertation or thesis and usually dealing with its subject from a limited and often personal point of view.

By adopting this title for three of his musical compositions, the American composer Samuel Barber seems to have indicated something about his principles of organization. His *Essays for orchestra* (1937, 1942 and 1978) are tightly woven, with each successive musical idea growing organically out of one that preceded it. If we think of a symphony as a dissertation, a musical essay is more concise, offering a range of ideas -- themes, rhythmic patterns, moods, orchestral textures - in less time. The analogy is not at all far-fetched. Barber was a highly literate composer whose interest in the written word ranged from ancient Greek drama to poets of his own age. He was an avid and intellectual reader who enjoyed the writings of 18th-century essayists as well as contemporary authors such as Aldous Huxley and E.B. White. The powerful presence of literature in many of his other compositions is consistent with his adaptation of the essay form for music.

Barber composed his *Second Essay* in 1942 at the request of Bruno Walter, who wanted a new work for the Philharmonic-Symphony Society of New York. His first sketches date back several years, however, and are contemporary with those for the Violin Concerto (1939). In fact, those who know Barber's *Overture to The School for Scandal* (1933) may recognize similarities of style and even some melodic resemblances to themes in the *Second Essay*. America had just gone to war at the time Barber worked on this piece. He was keenly aware that he could be called up for military service at any time. Years later, he said of the *Second Essay*, "Although it has no program,

one perhaps hears that it was written in wartime."

The piece divides into three principal sections. It opens with a wistful series of woodwind solos marked *Andante, un poco mosso*: first flute, then bass clarinet, English horn and oboe. Gradually the balance of the orchestra joins their dialogue, and Barber awards a richly lyrical second theme to the violas. As the texture thickens, the tension rises. Barber's handling of the orchestra is masterful, with wide leaps, unexpected accents and irregular rhythms taking full advantage of the coloristic potential in his large orchestra. The second section, *Molto allegro ed energico* is a fugue in 12/8 whose, chirping, chatterboxy subject derives from the opening theme. Virtually every instrument in the orchestra, including trumpets and timpani, has a solo opportunity. The final section, a chorale marked *Piu tranquillo, ma sempre muovendo*, provides a noble and dignified close to the *Second Essay*.

Barber's score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, side drum, bass drum, tam-tam and strings.

---

### **Three Dance Episodes from *On the Town***

**Leonard Bernstein**

**Born 25 August, 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts**

**Died 14 October, 1990 in New York City**

*Approximate duration 11 minutes*

For those of us who grew up on the familiar tunes of *West Side Story*, it is difficult to imagine a world in which Leonard Bernstein is not a household name. In the early 1940s, however, he was not yet world famous. Bernstein enjoyed a reputation as a talented young pianist and composer whose interests were leaning more and more toward conducting. Still, his career showed tremendous promise: at age 25 he was assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic, and the exciting young choreographer Jerome Robbins had asked him to collaborate on a wartime ballet entitled *Fancy Free*.

The ballet's plot concerns three sailors on shore leave in pursuit of the perfect girl -- in this case, most likely, the first available attractive female. Bernstein's sophisticated, jazzy dance score was a big success at its 1944 premiere. Oliver Smith, the set designer, recognized its potential for the more commercial venue of Broadway. Bernstein worked with Smith, George Abbott, Betty Comden and Adolph Green to develop the ballet into a full-fledged musical called *On the Town* that opened in December 1944 and ran for nearly 500 performances. Purely escape theater, the upbeat, fun show was a natural for a nation weary of war and hungry for lighthearted diversion.

*On the Town's* music is more sophisticated than most other contemporary musicals. As John Briggs has written:

Bernstein's lively, unself-consciously jazzy score was attuned to the rhythm and tempo of the times....The man who could employ jazz idioms for abstract musical purposes could also use the devices of symphonic rhetoric to make a theatrical point.

Nowhere is this gift more evident than in the three dance episodes from *On the Town*, where Bernstein's instrumental gift has free rein. The city's vibrant pulse courses through this music, bringing to life its diversity and humanity through three vignettes: *The Great Lover*, *Lonely Town: Pas de Deux* and *Times Square, 1944*. The last of the three was the finale of the musical's first act.

The score calls for flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, three clarinets, alto saxophone, two horns, three trumpets, three trombones; timpani and percussion including suspended cymbal, snare drum, bass drum, triangle, traps, wood block and xylophone; piano and strings.

---

## **University of Virginia Suite from *Thomas Jefferson: The Making of America***

**J. Todd Frazier**

**Born 22 June, 1969 in Houston, Texas**

**Currently residing in Houston**

*Approximate duration 24 minutes*

Todd Frazier has long been inspired by Jefferson's contributions to America and the world, his love of music, as well to Jefferson's private side, which offers a story of great personal challenges balancing extraordinary outward accomplishments. This Suite, drawn from his seven-movement oratorio, was commissioned by UVA and was premiered early last month on the Lawn, in celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jefferson laying the University's first cornerstone.

Mr. Frazier has graciously provided the following introduction to his piece:

My Suite begins with a setting of the Declaration of Independence, continues with an interlude based on music used for Jefferson's first inauguration, and ends with the story of the University of Virginia. The last, extended movement depicts the dream and beginnings of the University, the evolution of the school and Jefferson's final trip to the rotunda in 1826, that, in connection with his letter to the Mayor of Washington upon the 50th anniversary of the Declaration, offers a reflective conclusion to the work and a final call to action for his students and all Americans.

– J.T.F.

In addition to his work as a composer, Frazier is Director of Houston Methodist Hospital's Center for Performing Arts Medicine and President of the National Organization for Arts in Health. He believes the arts offer a dynamic common denominator in strategic collaboration that inspires innovation and transformation, while keeping us in tune with our humanity. His love for history inspires many of his works. In 2016, he received the Eastman School of Music's Luminary Award for "extraordinary service to music and the arts at the community and national levels" On the occasion of the Juilliard School's 100th anniversary in 2006, Frazier was recognized as one of 100 distinguished alumni and profiled in the Juilliard Journal's "A Quiet Revolution: Juilliard Alumni and The Transformation of Education in America Through the Arts."

His score calls for woodwinds in pairs, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion [chimes, tambourine, wind chimes, suspended cymbal, marimba, jaw harp], harp, soprano solo, tenor solo, narrator, violin solo and strings.

---

## *The Testament of Freedom*

**Randall Thompson**

**Born 21 April, 1899 in New York City**

**Died 9 July, 1984 in Boston**

*Approximate duration 24 minutes*

Some composers are destined to have greater impact through their students than through the legacy of their own music. Nadia Boulanger is one such example who comes to mind. The American composer Randall Thompson is another. In the course of his extraordinary and rich career, Thompson served on the faculties of Wellesley College, University of California at Berkeley, the Curtis Institute of Music (as its director), the University of Virginia and Princeton University, before returning to his alma mater, Harvard, in 1948. He remained there until his retirement in 1965. Over the course of those nearly forty years in academic and musical life, Thompson inspired thousands of music and liberal arts students. He also championed many of their careers, including that of the young Leonard Bernstein.

Outside the United States, Thompson's music is little known, perhaps because he was a conservative, tonal composer. That stated, he was a skilled musical craftsman with a great gift for melody. His teachers had included Archibald Davison and Ernst Bloch in this country and, after winning the Rome Prize in 1922, Francisco Malipiero in Italy. With their collective guidance, he honed his innate gift for mellifluous vocal lines. His best-loved works remain his choral compositions. Thompson's *Alleluia* (1940) was at one point the best-selling piece of choral music in the United States, and is still immensely popular with *a cappella* choruses in schools and churches. The other choral works upon which his reputation principally rests are *Americana* (1932), *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1936), *Frostiana* (1959) and *The Testament of Freedom* (1942).

*Testament*, which concludes this program, was written for the University of Virginia Glee Club in commemoration of the bicentennial of Thomas Jefferson's birth. Jefferson, of course, was both the founder of the University and the architect of most of its original buildings on the Charlottesville grounds. Thompson had no trouble in identifying texts, for the third President was also a prolific and gifted writer. His source for Part I was *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, a text that Jefferson delivered to the Colony of Virginia convention in 1774. For Parts II and III, Thompson chose Jefferson's *Declaration of Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*, written for the first Continental Congress in 1775. The final text, for Part IV, is later, drawn from a letter that Jefferson wrote to John Adams in 1821. By that time, the young nation was in its fourth decade, and had successfully weathered a second war with the British.

War and patriotism were clearly on Thompson's mind. When he began work on *The Testament of Freedom* in 1942, the United States was fully involved in the Allied military effort after having declared war on Japan in December 1941. Hitler's monolith was a military foe as formidable as the Japanese, and the war was taking a chilling toll on both the Atlantic and Pacific fronts. Like Aaron Copland's *Lincoln Portrait*, written in 1942, *Testament* celebrated American ideals of democracy and freedom through the words of one of its great presidents. The first performance took place at UVA's Cabell Hall on 13 April, 1943: Jefferson's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday and the university's Founders Day. Thompson was the pianist for the Glee Club's premiere. *Testament* immediately became popular with choruses throughout the United States, prompting the composer to

orchestrate it for full orchestra and concert band. More than thirty years later, he put his thoughts about the piece in writing.

The text of 1775 [Part I] fit the situation of 1939-1944 exactly. We had moved into the modern age, but what we had to say about permanent, democratic values at the time of the American Revolution applied equally to the turmoil of World War II. The greatness of Thomas Jefferson's democratic ideals was as valid in the 1940s as it had been in the 1770s. The words apply to everyday life as much as they apply to the rigors of wars and battles.

The greatness of Jefferson is not restricted to his greatness as a warrior. It was his greatness as the whole man that gives him stature. He himself exemplified this on his own tombstone: 'Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.' His extraordinary interest in music was one of the manifestations of his almost universal interests.

The initial [instrumental] motif is a rhythmic declaration of his name, and becomes a dominant theme towards the end of the work, ringing out in repeated exclamations, '(life and) liberty!'

Randall Thompson lived through both World Wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. He did not live to see the horror of our nation attacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001. He would, however, have understood the affirmation and reassurance an audience might derive from *The Testament of Freedom*. Jefferson's words are as relevant as ever in 2017, and the simple communicative power of Thompson's music speaks eloquently to us.

Thompson scored *Testament of Freedom* for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, men's chorus and strings.



This information is provided as a benefit to Charlottesville Symphony patrons. Reproduction or re-use in any form is expressly prohibited without written permission from the author.

by Laurie Shulman © 2017