

Program Notes

The word ‘Rhapsody’ is defined as: a portion of an epic poem adapted for recitation; a miscellaneous collection; a musical composition of irregular form having an improvisatory character. Indeed, many pieces of music possess these qualities, some of which unify the elements more masterfully than others. The works on tonight’s program combine their own strikingly different individual components into well-crafted compositions in unique ways to create a *bel composto*, or beautiful whole.

Missy Mazzoli’s **Sinfona (for Orbiting Spheres)** was commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and saw its premiere in 2013. The composer writes of her piece: “[It] is music in the shape of a solar system, a collection of rococo loops that twist around each other within a larger orbit. The word ‘sinfonia’ refers to baroque works for chamber orchestra but also to the old Italian term for a hurdy-gurdy, a medieval stringed instrument with constant, wheezing drones that are cranked out under melodies played on an attached keyboard. It’s a piece that churns and roils, that inches close to the listener only to leap away at breakneck speed, in the process transforming the ensemble turns into a makeshift hurdy-gurdy, flung recklessly into space.”

The piece takes listeners on a cosmic journey, clearly evoking the orbits of celestial bodies, as their paths cross one another. Although it doesn’t have what one might consider an improvisatory character, the piece is perfectly rhapsodic by definition. Its interlacing of irregular forms, or in this case loops, creates an almost whimsical atmosphere that beautifully illustrates the elliptical motion of planets in their orbit. Instead of simply depicting orbiting in space, the music allows its audience to feel what it is like to be those spheres, traveling through space and weaving in and out of each others paths.

Missy Mazzoli’s body of compositional works show her versatility as a composer and performer. She has received many awards and her music has been given great critical acclaim. In many ways, she is following in and expanding upon the path laid out by previous American composers. One particular American composer whose music was highly praised and awarded, and began his career at a young age was Samuel Barber.

Barber was born into a well-to-do and musical family. His father was a physician, his mother played piano, his maternal aunt was a contralto at the Metropolitan Opera, and her husband composed Art Songs. Barber’s musical talents were recognized at an early age, and he entered

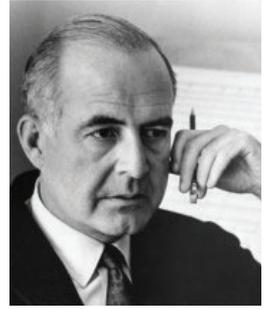
Photo by Caroline Tompkins



Missy Mazzoli

the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia at the age of fourteen, where he was praised for excelling at composition, piano, and voice. His entire body of work illustrates a coalescence of new and differing ideas to form a single entity. Many of his pieces bring together varying elements, and his entire canon shows his versatility in shifting between styles and genres.

Shortly after Barber began his tenure as composition professor at Curtis in 1939, he met Samuel Fels, a member of the schools board of directors. Fels commissioned Barber to write a violin concerto for the sum of \$1,000. In need of the money, he accepted the offer and began working on a piece that was to be premiered by Iso Briselli, a student at Curtis. After presenting the first two movements to Briselli, he suggested that Barber include more virtuosic passages in the third movement, and Barber agreed to his wishes. However, the young violinist was unhappy with the result. Stories tell of Briselli being unable to play it. Briselli and Barber broke their deal, but Fels allowed Barber to keep the amount he had already been paid for the work. The American violinist Albert Spalding, who was said to be looking for a concerto by an American composer to add to his repertoire agreed to perform the work, and premiered it with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1944. Barber wrote (of himself in the third person) of the concerto as follows:



Samuel Barber

“**The Concerto for Violin and Orchestra** was completed in July, 1940, at Pocono Lake, Pennsylvania, and is Mr. Barber’s most recent work for orchestra. It is lyric and rather intimate in character and a moderate-sized orchestra is used: eight woodwinds, two horns, two trumpets, percussion, piano, and strings. The first movement — Allegro Molto Moderato — begins with a lyrical first subject announced at once by the solo violin, without any orchestral introduction. This movement as a whole has perhaps more the character of a sonata than concerto form. The second movement — Andante Sostenuto — is introduced by an extended oboe solo. The violin enters with a contrasting and rhapsodic theme, after which it repeats the oboe melody of the beginning. The last movement, a perpetual motion, exploits the more brilliant and virtuosic characteristics of the violin.”

In much the same way that Samuel Barber exhibited great musical ability at a young age, Antonín Dvořák began studying violin and showed great talent at the age of six. His musical abilities, especially composition, appeared to come easily to him, leading to great success and garnering the attention of many well-known composers, including Johannes

Brahms. Many of Dvořák's works are clear examples of composing in a rhapsody-like way. Although many of his contemporaries and predecessors extracted folk melodies and elements of nationalism and incorporated them into their music, Dvořák was inspired by his native Bohemia, a duchy of Great Moravia (located near present day Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and other Slavic states). The lands of Bohemia and Moravia were taken into Hapsburg rule, and became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1800s, which instituted Germanization in the Slavic territories it controlled. Many of the folk songs, diverse tribes and cultures, and languages of his native land



Antonín Dvořák

influenced Dvořák's eclectic repertoire.

Dvořák composed his **Symphony No. 8 in G Major** as a means of celebrating his election to the Bohemian Academy of Science, Literature and Arts. Upon dedicating it, he stated: "To the Bohemian academy of emperor Franz Joseph for the encouragement of arts and literature, in thanks for my election."

Although the work consists of the typical four movements, Dvořák structured each movement in a very atypical manner. They each contain a variety of themes, whose origin often appears to come out of improvisation. Each theme unfolds and flows into the next in a perfectly natural way, creating a cohesive, and indeed rhapsody-like work. The unexpected synthesis of thematic material isn't the only manner in which Dvořák creates surprising elements; his modulations also forego traditional paths. The energetic first movement begins with the theme in G minor, but transforms into G major. This first theme reemerges at each new section in the movement. Many thematic elements swirl around quickly, each one slightly changing before it fully settles in the listener's ears.

The mostly somber second movement alternates between C minor and C major, where contrasting melodies masterfully overlap to create a pleasing amalgamation that functions well as a cohesive unit. The third movement embraces the culture of Bohemia. It is a scherzo, but also a waltz. Dvořák borrowed the main theme from his opera *The Stubborn Lovers*, where Tonik worries that his love, Lenka, will be married off to his father instead. The finale begins with a trumpet fanfare, and continues with a theme and variations. Dvořák was troubled by this simple theme. Though he stated the music flowed easily out of him, it proved to be a challenge, as it underwent nine revisions before he was satisfied. The piece ends by gently fading, only to swell at the end to ensure audiences would enjoy the work, a reaction Dvořák had come to expect.