

SAMUEL BARBER: *Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Opus 24 (1947)*

Notes on the Program

By Ken Meltzer

Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* was commissioned by the American soprano, Eleanor Steber (1916-1990). Steber's commission was the first ever by an American singer for a work scored for solo vocalist and orchestra. For the text, Barber chose a portion of a 1938 prose-poem by the American author, James Agee, "Knoxville: Summer of 1915." Barber was immediately taken by Agee's text, which had a profound personal resonance for him:

I had always admired Mr. Agee's writing and this prose-poem particularly struck me because the summer evening he describes in his native southern town reminded me so much of similar evenings when I was a child at home. I found out, after setting this, that Mr. Agee and I are the same age, and the year he described was 1915, when we were both five. You see, it expresses a child's feeling of loneliness, wonder, and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep.

The premiere of Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* took place on April 9, 1948, at Symphony Hall in Boston, Massachusetts. Steber was the soloist, accompanied by the Boston Symphony Orchestra and its Music Director Serge Koussevitsky. A year later, Barber revised the score, making some cuts and re-orchestrating the work for a more intimate ensemble. The revised version premiered at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., on April 1, 1950.

The marriage of Agee's text and Barber's music is pure magic. Steber, who grew up in Wheeling, West Virginia, commented about *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*: "That was exactly my childhood!" American soprano Leontyne Price was another celebrated interpreter of Barber's compositions, including *Knoxville*. Price, who was born in Laurel, Mississippi, in 1927, said of the work: "As a southerner, it expresses everything I know about my roots and about my mama and father...my home town... There's no cataloguing a great artist, it's just delving into the beauty of the Agee poem and setting it right to music. You can *smell* the south in it."

A black and white portrait of Gustav Mahler, wearing glasses and a suit, looking slightly to the right. The background is dark and textured.

GUSTAV MAHLER: Symphony No. 4 in G Major

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By Ken Meltzer

*“A manner more furious
than friendly”*

Gustav Mahler completed his Fourth Symphony in the summer of 1900. The premiere took place in Munich on November 25, 1901, with the composer leading the Kaim Orchestra. Before the opening performance, several members of the orchestra approached Mahler and confessed “they hadn’t been able to make head or tail of the work but would do their best to change their minds the following day.”

The audience and critics demonstrated a like sense of confusion. Everyone seemed to anticipate that Mahler’s Fourth would, in the spirit of his Second and Third Symphonies, be an epic, dramatic piece. They were decidedly taken aback by the apparent naïveté and simplicity of Mahler’s new score. Boos mingled with—and sometimes overwhelmed—demonstrations of support for Mahler’s latest Symphony. At the conclusion of the performance, Mahler took his bows “in a manner more furious than friendly.”

Nevertheless, the Fourth Symphony, with its abundant lyricism and relative brevity, quickly proved to be among the most accessible and popular of Mahler’s Symphonies. Today, each of Mahler’s Symphonies has received its due, both in concert performances and recordings. Still, the genial lyricism and grace the Fourth, sometimes called Mahler’s “Pastorale” Symphony, continue to accord the work a favored status. Further, close

analysis reveals that beneath the seemingly naïve exterior of the Fourth Symphony is an extraordinarily intricate, sophisticated and unified work.

Mahler on his Fourth Symphony

The following are some of Mahler’s comments regarding the nature and meaning of his Fourth Symphony:

What I had in mind here was unbelievably difficult to do. Imagine the uniform blue of the skies, which is more difficult to paint than all changing and contrasting shades. This is the fundamental mood of the whole. Only sometimes it darkens and becomes ghostly, gruesome. But heaven itself is not so darkened, it shines on in an eternal blue. Only to us it suddenly seems gruesome, just as on the most beautiful day in the woods, flooded with light, we are often gripped by panic and fear. The Scherzo (second movement) is mystical, confused and eerie so that your hair will stand on end. But in the following Adagio you will soon see that things were not so bad—everything is resolved.

In the final movement (“The Heavenly Life”), although already belonging to this higher world, the child explains how everything is meant to be.

Musical Analysis

I. *Bedächtig. Nicht eilen (Deliberate. Not hurried)*—The Symphony opens with a charming introductory passage for flutes, clarinets and sleigh bells. Following this introduction, the first violins sing the *grazioso* initial theme, containing a dotted-rhythm figure that is repeated by the lower strings (both the “sleigh bell” passage and dotted rhythm will play crucial roles in the final movement). A flurry of activity leads to the second principal theme, a broad, serene melody, played by the cellos. The third principal theme begins as a puckish duet for oboe and bassoon. A reprise of the “sleigh bell” introduction and a varied statement of the initial theme conclude the exposition.

The sleigh bell figure returns once again to initiate the development of the principal thematic material. Over a pizzicato bass figure, the flutes play a unison statement of a melody that incorporates the dotted rhythms of the opening theme, thereby anticipating the finale’s principal melody. The tension builds, leading to a trumpet passage Mahler referred to as “the little summons”—music that would also serve to open his Fifth Symphony (1902). The development moves to a *ppp* conclusion. After a brief pause, the violins launch the recapitulation with a varied restatement of the initial theme. The coda seems to portend a quiet resolution, but instead, concludes with the ensemble’s joyful statement.

II. *In gemächlicher Bewegung. Nicht eilen (In a leisurely motion. Without haste)*—Bruno Walter, the great German conductor and Mahler disciple, once described the second movement scherzo in the following manner: “The second movement might be called *Freund Hein spielt zum Tanz auf* (‘Friend Death is striking up the Dance’). Death fiddles rather strangely; his playing sends us up to heaven.” Mahler himself referred to this movement as a “Dance of Death.” To portray the eerie sound of Death’s fiddle, Mahler directs that the concertmaster tune his violin one whole tone higher.

The solo horn launches the scherzo, confronting a chirping response by the oboes and bassoon that recalls the work’s “sleigh bell” opening. The solo violin soon makes

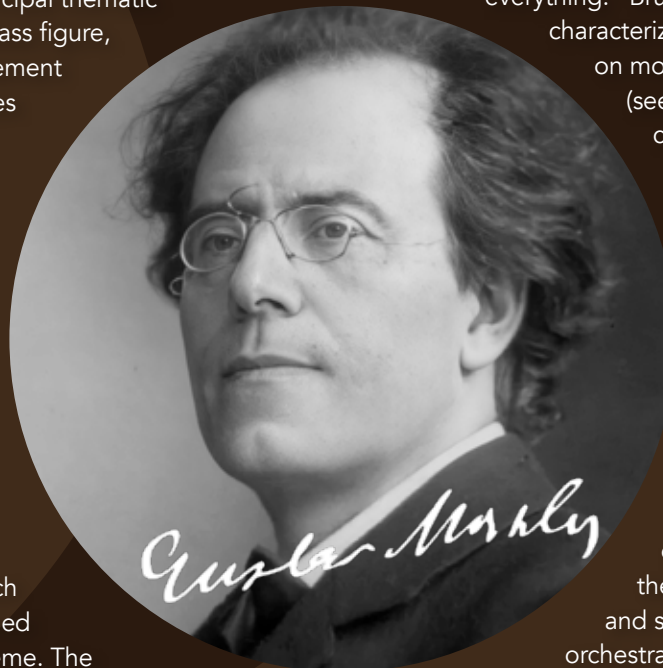
its macabre entrance. A more genial trio section, in the style of a charming Viennese *ländler* (a folkdance in triple meter), prominently features the winds. The scherzo and trio sections return, the latter again offering hints of the work’s closing movement. A final presentation of the scherzo section is capped by the oboes’ reprise of the chirping passage and a descending figure in the winds.

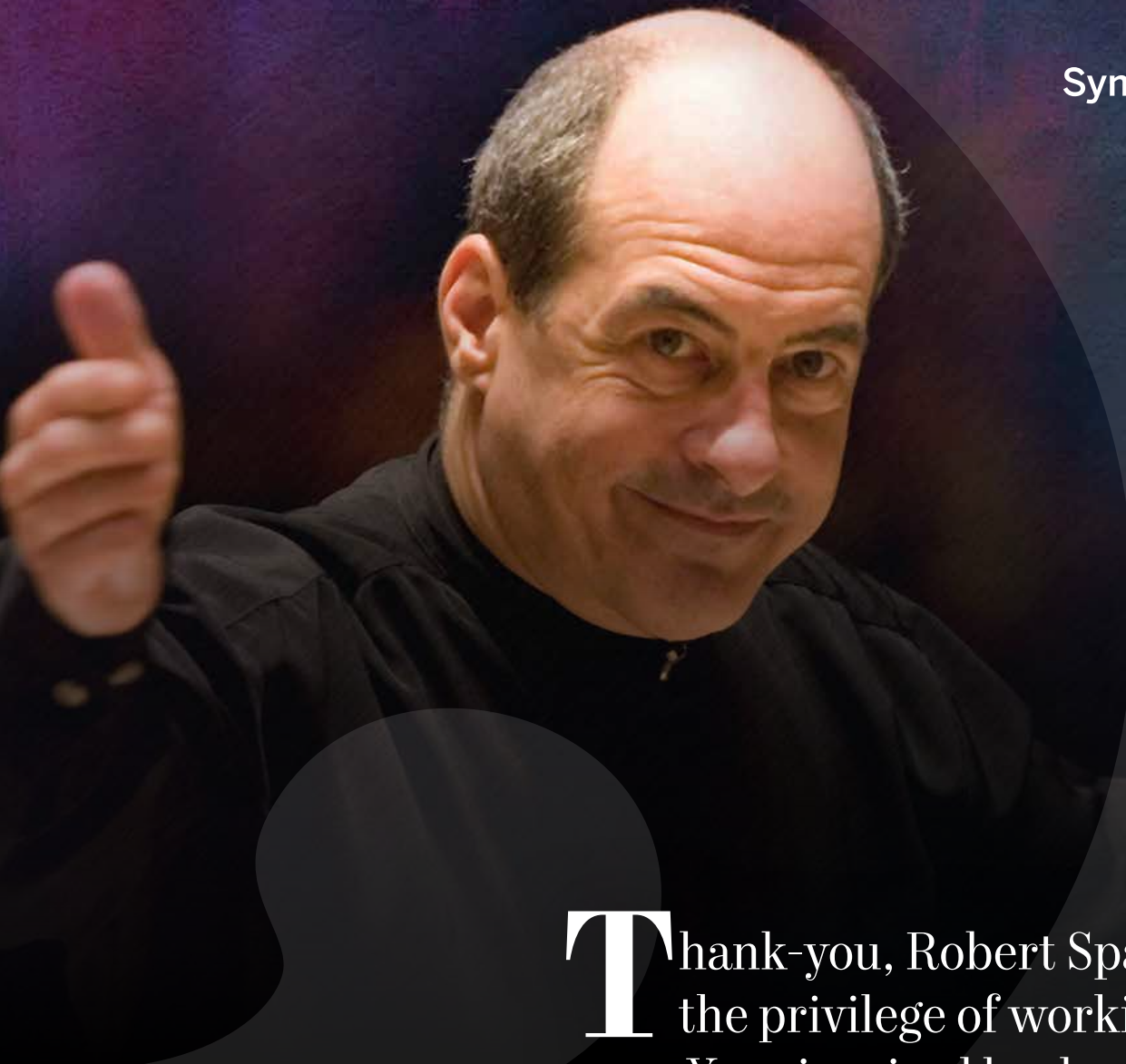
III. *Ruhevoll (Peaceful)*—According to Mahler’s friend, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, the composer referred to this movement as: “‘The Smiling of St. Ursula’ and said that at the time he had a childhood image of his mother’s face in mind, recalling how she had laughed through grieving and had smiled through tears, for she had suffered unendingly yet had always lovingly resolved and forgiven everything.” Bruno Walter recounted that Mahler characterized St. Ursula’s smile “like the ones on monuments of old knights or prelates (seen when walking through old churches), with their hands folded over their chests and the faint, peaceful smile of the departed who has found calm bliss.”

The slow-tempo movement features a set of variations on two themes. The cellos introduce a flowing, *espressivo* melody. The oboe launches the presentation of the mournful second theme. A final series of variations on the opening theme closes in the most restrained and serene fashion. Suddenly, the orchestra erupts with a resplendent passage that looks forward to the Symphony’s finale. Tranquility returns in the ethereal final measures.

IV. *Sehr behaglich (Very comfortably)*—Mahler described the finale as “the top of the Symphony’s pyramidal structure.” The previous movements all contain premonitions of a finale based upon Mahler’s setting of a poem from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn (The Youth’s Magic Horn)*. In the score, Mahler specifies that the text “be sung with childlike, cheerful expression; absolutely without parody!”

The finale opens with a brief orchestral introduction, followed by the entrance of the soprano, both featuring the omnipresent dotted rhythm. The “sleigh bell” motif from the Symphony’s opening movement serves as an orchestral interlude after the poem’s second, fourth, and seventh stanzas. The Symphony concludes with a brief, tranquil, orchestral postlude.





Thank-you, Robert Spano, for the privilege of working with you. Your inspired leadership of this great Orchestra has immeasurably enriched my musical life. I wish you the best in all your future endeavors.

– Ken Meltzer

