

Ashokan Farewell

JAY UNGAR (BORN IN 1946)

4 minutes; two percussion, harp, and strings.

Jay Ungar, born in Bronx, New York in 1946, is one of America's best-known traditional fiddlers. In the late 1970s, he put together his band, Fiddle Fever, and in 1980 established the Ashokan Fiddle and Dance Camps in the Catskill Mountains not far from Woodstock, New York. In 1984, two members of Fiddle Fever were working with a young filmmaker named Ken Burns on a documentary about the Brooklyn Bridge. They gave him a copy of their recording *Waltz of the Wind*, and a wistful tune on the album that Ungar had written in 1982 – *Ashokan Farewell* – so captured Burns' interest that he later used it in a film about Louisiana Governor Huey Long. Burns collaborated with Ungar on several subsequent projects, most memorably the landmark 1990 PBS documentary *The Civil War*, for which *Ashokan Farewell* provided the theme music; Ungar received an Emmy nomination for his work on the film's score and a Grammy for the soundtrack album. Ungar wrote, "Ashokan is the name of a town, most of which is now under a very beautiful and magical body of water called the Ashokan Reservoir, which provides drinking water for New York City, one hundred miles to the south. I composed *Ashokan Farewell* in the style of a Scottish lament in 1982 shortly after our Fiddle and Dance Camps had come to an end for the season. I was feeling a great sense of loss and longing for the music, the dancing and the community of people that had developed at Ashokan that summer. The transition from living at a secluded woodland camp with a small group of people who needed little excuse to celebrate the joy of living back to the world of cars, phones and apathy had been difficult. By the time the tune took form, I was in tears. I had no idea that this simple melody could affect others in the same way."

Two Interludes from "CIVIL warS"

PHILIP GLASS (BORN IN 1937)

10 minutes; two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets and strings.

Iconoclastic director Robert Wilson conceived *CIVIL warS* as a day-long theater work involving writers, composers and performers from many countries that would be staged in conjunction with the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Philip Glass (United States), David Byrne (born in Scotland, raised in Canada and the United States, and founding member of the new wave band Talking Heads), Gavin Bryars (England) and Hans Peter Kuhn (Germany) were enlisted as the principal composers. The scale of the undertaking and the lack of funding prevented the completion of the entire project, but three of its planned six sections have been performed; Glass' two-hour contribution was premiered in Rome in March 1984. Glass wrote that his visionary, non-narrative opera, which traced its original conception to Mathew Brady's photographs of America's Civil War, "portrays the future, the present, the past (both near and distant) and the legendary – all existing simultaneously. The opera is symbolic, metaphysical, realistic, metaphorical, and its stage ranges from ancient Athens to the spaceship-filled future of the human race." Its characters include Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, the Italian freedom fighter Giuseppe Garibaldi (and his soldiers), Hercules, Hopi dancers and "trees from many nations." Glass' *Two Interludes* are practical pieces: "Wilson needed time for a scene change in a couple of places, and asked me for some music. I composed a sort of pause, a respite from the stage action. They are quiet pieces."

Lincoln Portrait

AARON COPLAND (1900-1990)

14 minutes; two piccolos, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta, harp and strings.

Soon after the United States entered World War II, André Kostelanetz asked three American composers to write works that would convey "the magnificent spirit of our country." Following Kostelanetz's request, Virgil Thomson composed the *Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia Waltzes* and Jerome Kern the *Portrait for Orchestra of Mark Twain*. Aaron Copland was the third composer approached by Kostelanetz, and he wrote of his *Lincoln Portrait*: "The letters and speeches of Lincoln supplied the text. It was a comparatively simple matter to choose a few excerpts that seemed particularly apposite to our [wartime] situation. The order and arrangement of the selections are my own."

"The composition is roughly divided into three main sections. In the opening section, I wanted to suggest something of the mysterious sense of fatality that surrounds Lincoln's personality. Also, near the end of that section, something of his greatness and simplicity of spirit. [*Springfield Mountain* is the thematic basis of this portion.] The quick middle section briefly sketches in the background of the times during which he lived. [Fragments of Stephen Foster's *Camptown Races* figure prominently in this passage.] This merges into the concluding section, where my sole purpose was to draw a simple but impressive frame around the words of Lincoln."

Decoration Day from "Holidays Symphony"

CHARLES IVES (1874-1954)

9 minutes; piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, celesta,

piano and strings

Though composed in 1912, *Decoration Day* has its musical roots in an arrangement for band that the very young Charles Ives (aged twelve or thirteen) made of the hymn *Adeste Fidelis* for the May 30th celebrations in his native Danbury, Connecticut in 1886 or 1887. In the style of a solemn "Slow March" (Ives' word), the piece was played jointly by his father's Danbury Cornet Band (reputed to be the best in New England) and a visiting band from Carmel, New York. Ives turned this music into an organ prelude in 1897, and then incorporated it into *Decoration Day*, of which he gave this description: "In the early morning the gardens and woods about the village are the meeting place of those who, with tender memories and devoted hands, gather the flowers for the Day's Memorial. After the Town Hall is filled with the Spring's harvest of lilacs, daisies and peonies, the parade is slowly formed on Main Street. The march to Wooster Cemetery is a thing a boy never forgets. The roll of muffled drums and *Adeste Fidelis* answer for the dirge. A little girl on a fencepost waves to her father and wonders if he looked like that at Gettysburg.

"After the last grave is decorated, *Taps* sounds out through the pines and hickories, while a last hymn is sung. Then the ranks are all formed again, and we all march back to Town to a Yankee stimulant – Reeves' inspiring *Second Regiment Quick-Step* – though to many a soldier, the somber thoughts of the day underlie the tunes of the band. The march stops – and in the silence, the shadow of the early morning flower-song rises over the Town, and the sunset behind West Mountain breathes its benediction upon the Day."

Dona Nobis Pacem

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

(1872-1958)

40 minutes; piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, organ (ad lib.) and strings.

It was while Vaughan Williams was an undergraduate at Cambridge in the 1890s that he was introduced to the poetry of Walt Whitman by his fellow student Bertrand Russell. Whitman's verses were enjoying a considerable vogue in England at that time, and Vaughan Williams was not immune to the lure of the American poet's daring topics and experimental poetic structures, nor to his themes of mysticism, human dignity, love and freedom. The young musician acquired several editions of *Leaves of Grass*, including one small selection that he carried in his pocket, and as early as 1903 – the year in which Delius brought out his Whitman-based *Sea Drift* – began composing a work for chorus and orchestra using the words of the American writer. As the basis of this creation, he chose passages from *Leaves of Grass* that philosophically likened the individual's journey of life to an ocean voyage. Both the topic and its musical realization were imposing artistic challenges for Vaughan Williams, however, who, at age 31, had written only some songs, chamber pieces and small compositions for orchestra, and he was unable to finish the work at that time.

In 1905, Vaughan Williams turned his attention to another Whitman poem, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, and set a passage from it as "A Song for Chorus and Orchestra" titled *Toward the Unknown Region*. The work was presented at the 1907 Leeds Festival with enough success to encourage him to return to his earlier Whitman piece, which he completed in 1910 as *A Sea Symphony*. The following year he sketched a choral setting of Whitman's *Dirge for Two Veterans*, but then declined to have it performed or published, and put it away for over two decades. It was not until 1934, the year after Hitler had begun his threat to European political stability by bullying his way to power in Germany, that Vaughan Williams returned to the *Dirge* and to the words of Walt Whitman. Though the composer's output of the 1930s – the riotous *Five Tudor Portraits*, the comic opera *The Poisoned Kiss*, the colorful and ornate works for the coronation of George VI, the luminous *Serenade to Music* and the earliest sketches for the halcyon Fifth Symphony – remained largely in the pastoral nationalistic idiom principally associated with his music, the portentous Fourth Symphony of 1934 displayed a bristling modernity that many thought was influenced by the unsettling time of its creation. Though the composer asserted that there was nothing specifically programmatic about the Symphony, that his mind was drawn in the mid-1930s to foreboding thoughts of imminent war was confirmed by his revival of the *Dirge for Two Veterans* and the war-referencing text of the larger choral piece of 1934-1936, *Dona Nobis Pacem*, of which it became part.

To create the text for his *Dona Nobis Pacem*, Vaughan Williams surrounded his revised setting of the *Dirge* with a collection of quotations matched to his own war-wary sentiments: a line from the Roman Catholic Mass (*Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: dona nobis pacem* – "Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world: grant us peace"); additional stanzas from Whitman; a brief excerpt from John Bright's well-known "Angel of Death" speech delivered to the House of Commons in 1855 during a debate on the Crimean War; and a number of Biblical verses. Vaughan Williams organized *Dona Nobis Pacem* into five scenes that capture various aspects of war and its consequences. The work opens with the setting for soprano soloist and chorus of the *Dona nobis pacem* text, which begins introspectively but becomes a fervent supplication for peace as it proceeds. Before the entreaty can be answered, drum beats are heard as if from afar to lead without pause to a vehement interpretation of Whitman's poem about the crushing of everyday life by war, *Beat! beat! drums! — Blow! bugles! blow!* Following the horrible blast of conflict comes the *Reconciliation*, in which the baritone and chorus mourn those killed and maimed, and pronounce some of Whitman's most moving words – "For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead." The soprano quietly recalls the prayerful *Dona nobis pacem* as a bridge to the *Dirge for Two Veterans*, given as a solemn dead-march for chorus and orchestra. The movement is subdued and lamenting for most of its length, but rises to fury at the remembrance of the terrible hostilities which filled twin graves with the bodies of two veterans, a father and his son. The finale seeks assurance in the wake of the disturbing sentiments which have preceded it. A mighty hymnal tune of great optimism is launched in the middle of the movement, but the cantata ends not with a

ringing choral affirmation of confidence in the durability of peace, but rather with the quiet and hopeful prayer of the soprano – "Grant us peace" – fading into silence.

©2008 Dr. Richard E. Rodda