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FRIDAY 16 APRIL 2021, 7pm

National Concert Hall

COPLAND *Quiet City*

BARBER *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

ADAMS *Shaker Loops*

RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra

Gavin Maloney conductor

Rachel Croash soprano

Presented by **Paul Herriott**, RTÉ lyric fm



RTÉ lyric fm

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PROGRAMME NOTES

AARON COPLAND 1900-1990

Quiet City

It seems fitting that Aaron Copland, the acknowledged ‘Dean of American composers’, was born in 1900 at the beginning of a century that America would come to call its own. As modernity transformed the world around him, so Copland forged a contemporary signature for American classical music that generations since have emulated.

The economic and social modernisation of the vast continent was not without price. As they grew, America’s principal cities drew to them countless souls fleeing depression and victimisation around the globe in the hope of a better future in the New World. The plight of the anonymous individual struggling to make their way in the ever-crowded urban centres soon became a defining artistic trope – one thinks immediately of the isolated figures in Edward Hopper’s iconic portraits of the American city at night.

Others, too, had lit upon the loneliness that lay beneath the bustle of America’s expanding conurbations. In 1939, Irwin Shaw (later to find fame as a novelist with his wartime drama *The Young Lions* and generational family saga *Rich Man, Poor Man*) was commissioned to write a play for New York’s Group Theatre. The result was *Quiet City*, a tale of a young trumpet player newly arrived in the Big Apple with dreams of emulating his idol, Bix Beiderbecke, even as his brother abandons their shared past in order to succeed in business. Alone at night, he finds solace in improvising soulful portraits on his trumpet of the strangers who surround him during the day.

Commissioned to compose incidental music for the play, Copland aimed to ‘evoke the inner distress of the central character’ and produced one of his most subdued, but moving and poignant pieces. Rightly disappointed when Shaw’s ‘realistic fantasy’ closed after just two performances, the following year he fashioned an atmospheric concert suite for trumpet

and string orchestra from his music, adding a plaintive solo *cor anglais* to its sombre, sober palette.

Pensive and melancholic it may be in its haunting image of a deserted metropolis late at night. But even as the lone, nocturnal sentinel of the solitary trumpet player manages to evoke a telling sense of isolation and introspection, Copland's wide, Blues-accented intervals and lush, sonorous harmonics suggest wider vistas that hint at the promise of new beginnings.

Programme note Michael Quinn © RTÉ

SAMUEL BARBER 1910-1981

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Setting lyrics by the esteemed film critic, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, Oscar-nominated screenwriter and poet James Agee, Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, is a rhapsodic hymn to small-town America.

Composed in 1947 at the request of the soprano Eleanor Steber, it's a work marked by innocence and suffused with nostalgia; a sentimental salute to a halcyon way of life that was all too soon to be swept away by America's entry into the First World War and the Great Depression that followed.

Agee's poems had been published almost a decade earlier, before the horrors of the Second World War, in 1938. In a preface, the poet directed his readers: 'We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child'. The sentiment struck a chord with Barber, evoking for him memories of his own idyllic childhood in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Another telling parallel between the collaborators presented itself during the writing of *Knoxville*: the shadow of the six-year-old Agee losing his

father that lends such poignancy to his last memory of his intact family mirrored by the deteriorating health of Copland's own father while he was setting it to music and to whom he dedicated the finished piece.

Cast in four, through-played sections – marked *Andante un poco mosso*, *Allegro agitato*, *Allegretto* and *Maestoso* – Barber remains largely faithful to the rhythms and inflections of Agee's text. Memories of idylls now lost to time and made more distant by the clamour of the present are fused together by Barber's linking of the whole with a gently rocking melody that seems to suggest a lullaby – that most precious and most fleeting of familial contacts at its most intimate and lasting.

The soft, cosseting aura with which Barber clothes Agee's text shares some emotional kinship with the lush, bucolic grandeur of Canteloube's earlier salute to his own rural heritage, *Chants d'Auvergne*. But its evocation of a simpler, less crowded and pressurised time is surely also drawn from the same creative heart and hearth as Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* (first staged in the same year Agee published his poem) and Frank Capra's film *It's a Wonderful Life* (released the year before Steber prompted Barber to compose *Knoxville*).

But what sets *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* apart, and lends it its abiding ability to move, is its beguiling simplicity of execution, directness of expression and the loving tenderness with which it evokes the innocence, warmth and wonder of childhood.

A musical moment in glowing aspic, lit up by seemingly random details such as the swaying of a porch rocking chair on a balmy summer's evening or the clatter and rattle of a passing streetcar, it conjures a paradisaical summer's evening never to be repeated or recovered.

Programme note Michael Quinn © RTÉ

JOHN ADAMS b 1947

Shaker Loops

- i. *Shaking and Trembling*
- ii. *Hymning Slews*
- iii. *Loops and Verses*
- iv. *A Final Shaking*

Shaker Loops began as a string quartet with the title *Wavemaker*. At the time, like many a young composer, I was essentially unaware of the nature of those musical materials I had chosen for my tools. Having experienced a few of the seminal pieces of American Minimalism during the early 1970's, I thought their combination of stripped-down harmonic and rhythmic discourse might be just the ticket for my own unformed yearnings. I gradually developed a scheme for composing that was partly indebted to the repetitive procedures of Minimalism and partly an outgrowth of my interest in waveforms. The "waves" of *Wavemaker* were to be long sequences of oscillating melodic cells that created a rippling, shimmering complex of patterns like the surface of a slightly agitated pond or lake. But my technique lagged behind my inspiration, and this rippling pond very quickly went dry. *Wavemaker* crashed and burned at its first performance. The need for a larger, thicker ensemble and for a more flexible, less theory-bound means of composing became very apparent.

Fortunately I had in my students at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music an ensemble willing to try out new ideas, and with the original *Wavemaker* scrapped I worked over the next four months to pick up the pieces and start over. I held on to the idea of the oscillating patterns and made an overall structure that could embrace much more variety and emotional range. Most importantly the quartet became a septet, thereby adding a sonic mass and the potential for more acoustical power. The "loops" idea was a technique from the era of tape music where small lengths of prerecorded tape attached end to end could repeat melodic

or rhythmic figures ad infinitum. (Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain* is the paradigm of this technique.) The Shakers got into the act partly as a pun on the musical term "to shake", meaning either to make a tremolo with the bow across the string or else to trill rapidly from one note to another. The flip side of the pun was suggested by my own childhood memories of growing up not far from a defunct Shaker colony near Canterbury, New Hampshire. Although, as has since been pointed out to me, the term "Shaker" itself is derogatory, it nevertheless summons up the vision of these otherwise pious and industrious souls caught up in the ecstatic frenzy of a dance that culminated in an epiphany of physical and spiritual transcendence. This dynamic, almost electrically charged element, so out of place in the orderly mechanistic universe of Minimalism, gave the music its *raison d'être* and ultimately led to the full realisation of the piece.

Shaker Loops continues to be one of my most performed pieces. There are partisans who favour the clarity and individualism of the solo septet version, and there are those who prefer the orchestral version for its added density and power. The piece has several times been choreographed and even enjoyed a moment of cult status in the movie *Barfly*, an autobiographical account of the poet Charles Bukowsky's down and out days on LA's Skid Row. In a famous scene Bukowsky (Mickey Rourke), having been battered and bloodied by his drunken girlfriend (Faye Dunaway) holes up in a flophouse room, writing poems in a fit of inspiration to the accompaniment of the insistent buzz of *Shaking and Trembling*.

Programme note © John Adams

Shaker Loops

Music by John Adams

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