

Echoes of Innocence

Bax – *Summer Music* - 9'

Barber – *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* – C. Pfeiffer, soprano - 16'

Mahler – *Symphony No. 4* - 54'

Summer Music* *Arnold Bax (1883-1953)

The British composer Arnold Bax started composing fairly early and had a good list of compositions by the time he left the Royal Academy in 1905. Though a brilliant pianist, he didn't perform in public or conduct his own works. He was fortunate enough to never be obliged to earn a living and as a result never held any kind of official musical appointment. This allowed him to dedicate his life to his music and to undertake travel that widened his horizons. He felt a special sympathy with Irish subjects, being of Irish descent. He was also strongly influenced by Russian music, following a visit to Russia. He was knighted in 1937.

Bax wrote *Summer Music* in 1917 as a piano piece meant to evoke “a windless June midday somewhere in southern England.” He orchestrated it in 1920, and it was first performed in 1921. It opens with a horn solo that presents the principal theme and establishes the mood. The English horn then comes in to continue the melodic introduction. The piece develops into a pastorate of the English countryside with sweeping pastel colors and a sustained calm.

Knoxville: Summer of 1915* *Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Playing piano and cello at age 6, Barber got a good early start in music. By the age of 9, he knew he was meant to be a composer and not an athlete. He entered the Curtis School of Music at age 14 and studied composition, piano, and voice. In his twenties, he became well-known in the musical world and received commissions from famous performers such as Vladimir Horowitz, Leontyne Price, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. His awards include two Pulitzer prizes, the American Rome prize, and election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The text of *Knoxville* is an excerpt from a prose-poem of the same name by James Agee that begins: “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.” Barber used this as an epigraph for the score.

The American soprano Eleanor Steber was encouraged by her manager to commission works she could perform, so she asked Barber to write something that she could sing with an orchestra. It was unusual at the time for a serious American singer to perform works by an American composer. At the same time, Koussevitzky suggested that Barber write something for voice and orchestra. He had something more like a 3-movement symphony in mind, but Barber had already begun work on *Knoxville* and continued to work on his idea to its completion. *Knoxville* is a disarmingly frank picture of a child's view of home and family life with its joys and its unanswered questions.

Symphony #4* *Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Gustav Mahler had a difficult life from the beginning. Seven of Gustav's thirteen siblings died in infancy. As a boy he was a moody, introspective daydreamer. As a conservatory student he was very successful, winning piano and composition prizes. But he was preoccupied with the riddle of existence with its cruelty, pain, and death.

In his adult life he worked ceaselessly, conducting opera during the winter months and retreating in the summer to compose. He was a consummate, tyrannical conductor, striving ruthlessly for perfection and

showing indifference to personal considerations, including his own. As his wife Alma later put it, he was the most self-centered man she knew, yet he never thought of himself; his work was everything for him. As a composer, his greatest works were his symphonies.

Mahler's music is a kaleidoscope of moods, all of them intense. He surrounded any occasional episodes of pastel airy lightness with themes of bursting joy or raging angst. His melodies seem to reel on longer than a melody could possibly run. In a discussion with the Finnish composer Sibelius, he said, "The symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything."

The fourth symphony is Mahler's most approachable and the one in which he adhered most closely to the classic four-movement pattern. The first movement begins lightly and comically with sleigh bells and the chirps of flutes. The second movement includes a solo violin tuned a whole-tone higher than normal. This movement has been likened to shadows cast by candlelight on a nursery wall. The third contains deeply felt melodies and dramatic contrast. The fourth features a soprano soloist, who sings the words of a poem called "What the Child Tells Me" that describes the delights of life in heaven.