

Oregon Symphony

CARLOS KALMAR, MUSIC DIRECTOR

Music for a Time of War

Saturday, May 7 at 7:30 p.m.

Sunday, May 8 at 2 p.m.

Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall

Carlos Kalmar, conductor

Sanford Sylvan, baritone

CHARLES IVES **The Unanswered Question**

JOHN ADAMS ***The Wound-Dresser***
Sanford Sylvan, baritone

BENJAMIN BRITTEN ***Sinfonia da Requiem***
Lacrymosa
Dies Irae
Requiem Aeternum

Intermission

RALPH VAUGHAN
WILLIAMS **Symphony No. 4 in F minor**
Allegro
Andante moderato
Scherzo: Allegro molto
Finale con epilogo fugato: Allegro molto – Con anima

THIS WEEKEND'S PERFORMANCES ARE BEING RECORDED LIVE FOR A COMPACT DISC TO BE RELEASED IN FALL.

THE CONCERT CONVERSATION, conducted one hour before each performance, will be presented by Music Director **Carlos Kalmar** and **Robert McBride**, host for the stations of All Classical FM. You can also enjoy the Concert Conversation in the comfort of your own home. Visit the web site allclassical.org to watch the video on demand.

CHARLES IVES
The Unanswered Question from *Two Contemplations*

Vital Stats

Composer: born Oct. 20, 1874, Danbury, Conn.; died May 19, 1954, New York

Work composed: 1906, revised circa 1930-35

World premiere: Theodore Bloomfield conducted a chamber orchestra of graduate students from The Juilliard School on May 11, 1946, in New York. (Bloomfield would later serve as the Oregon Symphony's music director from 1955 to 1959.)

Oregon Symphony premiere: Jan. 7, 1974, with Lawrence Leighton Smith conducting

Most recent Oregon Symphony performances: Jan. 14-15, 2007, with Carlos Kalmar conducting

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, oboe, clarinet, trumpet and strings

Estimated duration: 6 minutes

Charles Ives wrote this existential music, subtitled "A Cosmic Landscape," as a counterpart to his *Central Park in the Dark*. Ives paired the two compositions together: "1. 'A Contemplation of a Serious Matter' or 'The Unanswered Perennial Question' and 2. 'A Contemplation of Nothing Serious' or 'Central Park in the Dark' in 'The Good Old Summer Time.'"

Ives included the following comments in the score:

"The strings play *ppp* throughout with no change in tempo. They are to represent 'The Silences of the Druids – Who Know, See, and Hear Nothing.' The trumpet intones 'The Perennial Question of Existence,' and states it in the same tone of voice each time ... the hunt for 'The Invisible Answer,' undertaken by the flutes and other human beings, becomes gradually more active ... as the time goes on, [the flutes], after a 'secret conference,' seem to realize a futility, and begin to mock 'The Question.' After they disappear, 'The Question' is asked for the last time, and 'The Silences' are heard beyond in 'Undisturbed Solitude.'"

The strings provide the harmonic underpinning, floating a series of slow-moving shimmering chords that seem revealed, rather than composed. Ives eschews traditional harmonic progressions; in a manner that anticipated the minimalism of the 1970s, the chords evolve with no linear directionality. Over the strings, a solo offstage trumpet intones a haunting, ambiguous five-note question, repeated seven times. Six of the "questions" trigger responses from a quartet of flutes. These responses range from a tentative restatement of the question to angry outbursts that seem to refute it.

Ives' explanation of the trumpet solo as "The Perennial Question of Existence," is deliberately ambiguous. The question is not only unanswered but unspecified, each listener being free to interpret its meaning for themselves. In the context of today's program, "Music for a Time of War," the question could ponder the unending senselessness of humanity's inability to avoid bloodshed.

JOHN ADAMS ***The Wound-Dresser***

Vital Stats

Composer: born Feb. 15, 1947, Worcester, MA

Work composed: 1989, for baritone Sanford Sylvan; based on texts from Walt Whitman's poem *The Wound-Dresser*, part of a larger collection of Whitman's poems about the Civil War called *Drum-Taps*.

World premiere: Adams led the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Sylvan in the first performance on Feb. 24, 1989.

Oregon Symphony premiere: At these concerts

Instrumentation: solo baritone, piccolo, flute, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, piccolo trumpet, timpani, synthesizer and strings

Estimated duration: 20 minutes

In 1988, John Adams' father died. He had suffered from Alzheimer's disease for several years, during which time Adams' mother nursed him. Adams watched his mother devote her life to caring for her ailing husband, and he also witnessed the ravaging scourge of AIDS on many friends and their loved ones.

Adams notes: "I was plunged into an awareness not only of dying but also of the person who cares for the dying. ... The bonding that takes place between the two is one of the most extraordinary human events that can happen – something deeply personal of which most of us are completely unaware." This powerful human interaction moved Adams to compose *The Wound-Dresser*, based on excerpts from a poem by Walt Whitman about his experiences as a nurse during the Civil War.

"*The Wound-Dresser* is the most intimate, most graphic and most profoundly affecting evocation of the act of nursing the sick and dying that I know of," Adams explains. "It is also astonishingly free of any kind of hyperbole or amplified

emotion, yet the detail of the imagery is of a precision that could only be attained by one who had been there.

"*The Wound-Dresser* is not just about the Civil War, nor is it just about young men dying (although it is locally about both). It strikes me as a statement about human compassion of the kind that is acted out on a daily basis, quietly and unobtrusively and unselfishly and unfailingly."

Adams' orchestral writing reflects and enhances Whitman's poetry. The instrumental interludes signal the shifting moods of each stanza; Adams also features solo instruments, in particular an ethereally high violin and a lingering trumpet melody. Throughout this 20-minute elegy, Adams' accompaniment tends toward restraint, giving Whitman's most graphic lines greater emotional impact than would an obviously dramatic interpretation.

Text from the *Wound-Dresser* by Walt Whitman

BENJAMIN BRITTEN ***Sinfonia da Requiem*, Op. 20**

Vital Stats

Composer: Born Nov. 22, 1913, Lowestoft, England; died Dec. 4, 1976, Aldeburgh, England

Work composed: 1940; Britten dedicated the *Sinfonia da Requiem* "to the memory of my parents"

World premiere: John Barbirolli led the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall on Mar. 31, 1941.

Oregon Symphony premiere: Feb. 26, 2005, with Carlos Kalmar conducting

Most recent Oregon Symphony performances: At the concerts of Feb. 26-28, 2005

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1 doubling alto flute, 1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 3 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet), alto saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tambourine, whip, xylophone, piano, harp and strings

Estimated duration: 18 minutes

In 1940, the government of Japan commissioned works from composers around the world, including a 26-year-old Benjamin Britten, to commemorate the 2,600th anniversary of the Japanese empire. Britten was an ardent pacifist, and as Japan was allied with Germany, which was itself at war with England, Britten hesitated before accepting. He eventually did so with the condition that he not be required to write what he termed "musical chauvinism." Instead, Britten produced a work that served a dual purpose: It expressed his grief over the deaths of his parents a few years earlier and made a pointed statement about his anti-war beliefs. The resulting *Sinfonia da Requiem*, as its title suggests, alludes to the Catholic Requiem Mass.

The Japanese were outraged that Britten wrote a memorial to his parents (music, moreover, with overt Christian theological underpinnings) to mark a Japanese national celebration. In his rejection of the work, Prince Fuminar Konoye, president of the Committee for the 2,600th Anniversary, wrote to Britten, "Besides being a purely religious music of a Christian nature, it has melancholy tone both in its melodic pattern and rhythm, making it unsuitable for performance on such an occasion as our national ceremony."

Why Britten thought the Japanese would approve his finished work is something of a mystery, as it is clearly neither joyful nor celebratory. Nor is it likely the Japanese would have been willing to feature music with such an explicit anti-war message, given their aggressive militaristic activities.

Britten was unapologetic, however. In a letter to a friend he explained: "I'm making it just as anti-war as possible. I don't believe you can express social or political or economic theories in music, but by coupling new music with well-known musical phrases, I think it is possible to get over certain ideas."

Musically, the *Sinfonia da Requiem* hints at Mahler, particularly in its shifting tonalities. In another nod to Mahler, Britten also juxtaposes a chamber-music style of writing for a select few instruments with the power and sweep of the full orchestra. In the opening *Lacrymosa* (Weeping) an angular, dissonant main theme first heard in the saxophones builds to an anguished clash of D minor vs. D major. The *Dies Irae's* (Day of Wrath) winds and brasses generate frenzy and tension. Here Britten effectively creates a sense of terror, which resolves with the calm of the *Requiem Aeternam* (Eternal Rest). Britten's music publisher, Erwin Stein, described the delicate opening melody of the three flutes as a "slumber song," a gentle lullaby that suggests the tranquility of eternal rest. The slumber song returns briefly at the end as a concluding benediction.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS **Symphony No. 4 in F minor**

Vital Stats

Composer: Born Oct. 12, 1872, Down Ampney, Gloucester, England; died Aug. 26, 1958, London

Work composed: 1931-34; dedicated to Vaughan Williams' friend and colleague, Arnold Bax

World premiere: Adrian Boult led the BBC Symphony Orchestra at Queen's Hall in London on Apr. 10, 1935.

Oregon Symphony premiere: Feb. 23, 1959, with Theodore Bloomfield conducting

Most recent Oregon Symphony performances: Oct. 6-8, 2001, with James Judd conducting

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle and strings

Estimated duration: 34 minutes

"I don't know whether I like it, but this is what I meant."

- Ralph Vaughan Williams, during a rehearsal of his Symphony No. 4

Ralph Vaughan Williams' Fourth Symphony is the first of his symphonies with no descriptive designation, like "London" or "Pastoral." This lack of program title immediately announces a departure from the lyrical Englishness often associated with Vaughan Williams' style. Both critics and colleagues were nonetheless determined to attribute non-musical meaning to this powerful, often dissonant music, much to Vaughan Williams' annoyance.

Given the political situation in Europe in 1935, when the Fourth Symphony premiered, it is understandable that many listeners interpreted it as Vaughan Williams' response to current events. One friend opined, "Someone said it should have been called 'Europe 1935' [although the symphony was composed primarily in 1931-32], and that is rather what it conveyed to me – the feeling of some huge force at work, driving us to fight and struggle, which may eventually shatter us to pieces, and yet we know in our hearts of hearts that there is something in life, which withstands destruction and brings order out of disorder." Adrian Boult, who conducted the premiere, considered the Fourth Symphony "a magnificent gesture of disgust" against war and fascism.

Vaughan Williams' wife probably came closest to explaining her husband's intentions when she declared: "He was experimenting with purely musical ideas. No sea or city, no essence of the country was at the heart of this score, and what emerged has something in common with one of Rembrandt's self portraits in middle age."

Vaughan Williams, in what all artists will recognize as a sincere description of the creative process, wrote in a letter to a friend, "I wrote it not as a definite picture of anything external – e.g. the state of Europe – but simply because it occurred to me like this – I can't explain why." In one memorable, if anecdotal, instance, when asked what the symphony was about, Vaughan Williams is said to have snapped, "It is about F minor."

Although sonically a 20th century work, structurally the Symphony No. 4 is consciously modeled after Beethoven, particularly his Fifth and Ninth symphonies. Vaughan Williams himself admitted as much. "I have never had any conscience about cribbing," he wrote. "I cribbed ... the opening of my F minor Symphony deliberately from the finale of [Beethoven's] Ninth Symphony," specifically the grinding dissonance of the brass fanfare that begins the Ninth's final movement. Two four-note chromatic themes, heard back-to-back as they open the *Allegro*, recur as unifying devices throughout the rest of the symphony. The Fourth Symphony also features flashes of humor, particularly in the *Scherzo*, and moments of unconstrained romanticism.

Most critics concurred with Eric Blom of the *Birmingham Post*, who wrote, "[Vaughan Williams'] latest work is as harshly and grimly uncompromising in its clashing, dissonant polyphony as anything the youngest adventurer would dare to fling down on music paper. That the symphony is a tremendously strong, convincing and wonderfully devised work cannot be questioned." Another critic noted the "vociferous applause," which grew "almost hysterical when the composer took his bow."

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Program Notes by Elizabeth Schwartz

Elizabeth Schwartz is a Portland-based free-lance writer, researcher and musician. In addition annotating programs for the Oregon Symphony and other ensembles, she has also contributed to NPR's *Performance Today* (now heard on American Public Media). Schwartz also co-hosts *The Portland Yiddish Hour*, heard at 10 a.m. Sundays on KBOO 90.7 FM. Email: schwartzelizabeth@yahoo.com.

Recommended Recordings by Michael Parsons

Ives: The Unanswered Question

Leonard Bernstein-New York Philharmonic
Deutsche Grammophon 429220

or

Michael Tilson Thomas-San Francisco Symphony
RCA Victor Red Seal 63703

Adams: *The Wound-Dresser*

Nathan Gunn-Baritone
Marin Alsop-Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra
Naxos 8559031

(NOTE: Sanford Sylvan's Nonesuch recording of *The Wound-Dresser* is currently out of print.)

Britten: *Sinfonia da Requiem*

Sir Simon Rattle-City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
EMI Classics 73983
or
Benjamin Britten-SWR Sinfonieorchester
Hansler Classic 94213

Vaughan Williams: *Symphony No. 4*

Andre Previn-London Symphony
RCA Victor Gold Seal 60583
or
Richard Hickox-London Symphony Orchestra
Chandos 9984

These selected recordings are available at Classical Millennium, located at 3144 E. Burnside in Portland.