Program Notes

By Ed Wight

Charles Tomlinson Griffes
The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan (1912/17)

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, piano, celesta, and strings.

Duration: about 13 minutes

American music lost a composer of talent and distinction when Charles Griffes died in 1920 at age 35—the same age as Mozart. Born in Elmira, New York, Griffes studied in Germany from 1903-07. Not surprisingly, he wrote in the German, late Romantic style of Brahms and Richard Strauss upon his return to the States. “What is remarkable is that he was speaking it so fluently” (American Record Society) in his first published works (such as his 1907 Symphonische Phantasie for orchestra and his early German songs).

But this talented man of wide-ranging and eclectic tastes soon embraced a very different style in such piano works as Roman Sketches, and 3 Tone Pictures (1910). They reflect the rich harmony of French Impressionism—“the gliding parallel chords, whole-tone scales and augmented triads” (2001 New Grove Dictionary) found in Debussy. And he changed styles yet again at the end of his life with the pervasive dissonance and abstract harmony of Skryabin and Ives in the Piano Sonata (1918) and the Three Preludes for piano (1919), his last completed work.

Griffes also demonstrated “an intense sensitivity to color. He was interested in photography, and was a talented painter, producing delicately conceived watercolors” (American Records). With a lifelong interest in Oriental culture, Griffes puts this approach to color on full display in today’s Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan. His 1917 symphonic version of this 1912 piano piece became his most celebrated orchestral work. Griffes based it on passages of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1816 poem Kubla Khan. His remarkable “sensitivity to text and mood” surfaces immediately, now treating the opening, low-register piano rumbling as just another orchestral color. His ability to depict various Coleridge scenes—“the sacred river Alph...sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice...the miracle of
rare device”—surfaces in a series of delicate solos for oboe and clarinet, harp, flute, violin and English horn. They recall the style of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* and the lush orchestral orientalism so popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Though his mature compositions spanned only thirteen years, *Kubla Khan* and other important works performed in 1917-19 nonetheless “established Griffes as one of the major American composers of the time” (New Grove). Sadly, fate denied him the chance to build on this achievement. Pierre Monteux’s December 1919 premiere of this orchestral version with the Boston Symphony appeared just months before Griffes’ death the following April.

**Samuel Barber**

**Violin Concerto, op. 14 (1939)**

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes (2nd doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani and snare drum, piano, and strings.

**Duration:** about 25 minutes

Samuel Barber wrote enduring masterpieces in almost every major genre. However, the New Grove Dictionary states that he fashioned an unusual career for an American composer, because “unlike Copland, Harris, Blitzstein and Virgil Thomson [and Ives]…Barber rarely incorporated popular, jazz, and folk idioms into his compositions.” Nonetheless, his biographer Barbara Heyman writes that Barber “was one of the most honored and frequently performed American composers in Europe during the middle decades of the 20th century.” His Symphony no. 1 (1936) was the first American work performed at the Salzburg Festival, and his *Vanessa* (1958) was the first American opera produced there.

Toscanini’s performance of his *Adagio for Strings* brought him international prominence in 1938. The following year his *Violin Concerto* became Barber’s first major commission after his student years at Curtis Institute of Music. The violinist it was commissioned for—Curtis graduate Iso Briselli—disavowed the work and never performed it. But after its triumphant 1941 premiere by Albert Spalding and the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Eugene Ormandy, it quickly entered the standard repertory, becoming one of the most frequently performed of all 20th century concertos.

The opening two movements revel in Barber’s neo-romantic style, “an uncompromising pursuit of tonality and lyrical expression” (Hey-
man). Two lovely, songlike themes dominate the first movement. The soloist introduces the tender primary theme in the opening bar, and it later receives the exquisite warmth of Barber’s sophisticated harmonic accompaniment in the orchestra. A clarinet solo introduces the livelier secondary theme, followed by the violin’s legato and highly varied response. The orchestra alternates between delicate and dramatically forceful presentations of these themes.

Barber’s Andante slow movement provides “one of the great lyrical effusions in American music” (critic Stephen Ledbetter). It opens with a poignant oboe theme in C-sharp Minor in the long-breathed, elegiac vein of the Adagio for Strings “which the violin ultimately cannot resist” (Phillip Huscher). The remarkable harmonic transformations finally conclude this movement in the warmth of E Major. In the demanding finale, Barber writes one of the few completely non-stop perpetuum mobile movements in the concerto repertory. Its more challenging dissonance and rhythm also herald Barber’s turn to a somewhat more progressive style in the 1940s, culminating in the quasi-serial passages of his 1949 piano sonata.

Barber’s great mastery accomplished what every composer dreams of, but very few attain. “Almost all his published works...entered the repertory soon after he wrote them...and continue to be widely performed today” (New Grove). During Barber’s lifetime, though, many critics, scholars and musicians of 20th-century avant garde modernism held tonal works and accessible, lyrical style—as well as their composers—in contempt. However, after that mid-century fervor crested in the 1960s and 70s, a re-examination was in order. Musicologist Leon Botstein writes that “Copland, Britten, Shostakovich and Barber now appear central to any musical characterization of the 20th century.”

**Chris Rogerson**

**Of Simple Grace** (2017)

**Instrumentation:** flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, percussion, harp, piano, celesta, and strings.

**Duration:** about 6 minutes

Born in 1988, American composer Chris Rogerson continues to garner major awards and commissions. Like Samuel Barber, he studied at Curtis (with prominent American composers Jennifer Higdon and Aaron Jay Kernis) and now teaches there. Rogerson earned a Charles Ives Scholarship, a Theodore Presser Career Grant, and an ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Award, among others. He also won Composer-in-Residence positions for Chamber Music Northwest, the Young Concert Artists Inc., and from 2014–17 the Amarillo Symphony.
The San Francisco Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, Houston Symphony and Kansas City Symphony have all performed works by this promising young composer. He specializes in the instrumental genres, writing primarily chamber works (including four string quartets) and orchestral pieces. Rogerson’s *Oaken Sky* (2011) reveals a special gift for myriad orchestral scoring effects and blending of color.

Rogerson often favors brief orchestral works, and in 2017 he wrote *Of Simple Grace* as a six-minute cello concerto for Yo-Yo Ma. This year he re-scored it as a violin concerto for today’s soloist, Elena Urioste. Rogerson’s comments: “The piece begins with a bright and bell-like texture before a simple melody is presented in the violin and strings. Throughout this work I wanted to maintain a sense of sweetness; the overall feeling at times suggests a lullaby.”

**George Gershwin**

*Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture*

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, 2 alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, banjo, timpani, percussion, 2 harps, and strings.

**Duration:** about 24 minutes

George Gershwin died in 1937 at the age of 38, yet another tragically early death of a great composer. In 1951 Gene Kelly, Alan Jay Lerner, and director Vincente Minelli created an entire movie musical—complete with other Gershwin songs—out of Gershwin’s orchestral tone poem *An American in Paris*. Similar recreations continued from 1983-2015, as four other new Broadway musicals appeared based on Gershwin songs: *My One and Only*, *Crazy for You*, *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, and a completely different production of *An American in Paris*. “No other songwriter of Gershwin’s era has enjoyed a similar pattern of book-show reinventions beginning in the late 20th century” (Gershwin scholar Todd Bekker). Gershwin’s quintessentially American voice—through 25
original musicals and over 500 songs—continues to speak to modern audiences over 80 years after his death.

As great as his songs are, Gershwin’s accomplishments ranged far beyond those of just another Broadway ‘song pluggers.’ “Gershwin sought ‘American’ variants of ‘high’ musical genres...His 1913 Ragging the Traumerei paired ragtime with a Schumann song” (Joseph Horowitz). He incorporated Broadway and jazz elements into traditional classical genres. In addition to their wonderful songs, could Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, or Cole Porter also write two operas (Blue Monday and Porgy & Bess), two piano concertos (Rhapsody in Blue, and the Piano Concerto in F Major), an orchestral tone poem (An American in Paris), concert overture (Cuban Overture), piano preludes, and an extended theme and variations piece (his jazz-oriented piano variations on I’ve Got Rhythm)? And Gershwin succeeded. In 1928, “by the age of thirty he was America’s most famous and widely accepted composer of concert music” (New Grove).

In 1925, Dubose Heyward wrote his novel Porgy, set in the African American community of Charleston, South Carolina. Two years later, his wife and playwright Dorothy Kuhns Heyward helped him turn it into a successful play, which ran for over 300 performances in New York. Gershwin spent much of the summer of 1934 in Charleston, part of several years he spent writing his opera version, Porgy and Bess. Reflecting his glorious, mature style, the opera includes recitatives, songs, choruses, and orchestral interludes. It debuted in New York with an all African-American cast in 1935, drawing mixed reviews in part because of its unblinking depiction of murder, fights, and drug addiction. Gershwin was disappointed by this reception, but felt that it would ultimately be viewed as his greatest work.

In 1942, conductor Fritz Reiner asked the great arranger Robert Russell Bennett to write a medley of some of his (Reiner’s) favorite passages from Porgy and Bess. By that time Bennett had become “America’s premier theatre orchestrator, a position he held for four decades” (New Grove). Bennett arranges some of Gershwin’s most atmospheric orchestral interludes, as his Symphonic Picture opens with the scene from Catfish Row and introductions to Act 3 and Act 1. It also features magnificent songs—Summertime, I’ve Got Plenty o’ nuttin, Bess You is My Woman, There’s a Boat Leavin’ Soon for New York, It Ain’t Necessarily So, and the Finale—in that order.

George’s brother Ira Gershwin wrote most of the song lyrics for the opera—but not Summertime. The Heywards wrote the words for that iconic and celebrated song. The ‘Finale’ features the work of the other major contributor, Reuben Mamoulian. He directed both the play and the opera productions, but felt the ending of the play was too bleak. After Bess leaves Porgy and moves to New York, Mamoulian added the
scene where the disabled Porgy vows to follow her, and has the cast sing the traditional spiritual *Oh Lord, I’m on my Way* for a more upbeat conclusion. Gershwin rewrote the music for the spiritual, but incorporated variants of its melodic phrases.

George died two years after the opera’s premiere, but Ira continued writing lyrics that are “considered among the finest in American popular culture” (New Grove), partnering with such accomplished composers as Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, Arthur Schwartz, and Kurt Weill. He lived until 1983, long enough to see George’s hope for *Porgy and Bess* come true, now “hailed as an artistic triumph…with successful performances for over half a century” (New Grove Opera).

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