

MONTEREY SYMPHONY

75

2022

Program Notes

by Dr. Alicia Mastromonaco

March 19-20, 2022

Jean Sibelius

Finlandia, Op. 26

When Finnish composer Jean Sibelius was born, his home country was still part of the Russian Federation. The Grand Duchy of Finland maintained a modicum of autonomy until Nicholas II's February Manifesto of 1888, when he subjected Finnish papers and reporters to Russian censorship, made the Russian Orthodox church the official church of state, and made the Finnish Army follow Russian rules of military service. The Finnish people saw this act as taking away their rights to rule themselves, which would eventually destroy their culture, and there was a cultural reaction against the manifesto. In 1899, there was a benefit concert for Finnish reporters' pension funds, for which Sibelius composed a set of six tableaux and a prelude, titled "Press Celebration Music." The final piece, "Finland Awakes," would eventually become the piece now known as *Finlandia*.

Finlandia is a series of short musical vignettes that culminates in its famous hymn. The work begins with the brass, bassoons, basses, and timpani, growling an ominous chorale. The woodwinds, and then the strings, enter the chorale. The nervous energy slows to a halt, then reemerges and hurls forward into a chattering allegro. The strings propel forward as if they are a boat about to capsize. Suddenly, the entire orchestra switches into major and embarks upon a triumphal march. Finally, the beloved "hymn" section emerges. Finnish listeners loved the melody so much that they started to set the tune to words. Sibelius was perplexed by this, saying, "It is not intended to be sung...it is written for orchestra. But if the world wants to sing it, it can't be helped." Indeed, the melody became so beloved that it is now affectionately known as "the unofficial national anthem of Finland." 

Samuel Barber

Violin Concerto, Op. 14

American composer Samuel Barber was one of the first students to matriculate at the Curtis Institute of Music in 1924 when it opened. He later became a professor there. While schooling is hardly the most important element of a biography, in the case of Barber's violin concerto, the Curtis connection is what made this work possible, even if it is a storied history.

The story begins in 1939, when Samuel Fels, of the Fels Naptha soap empire, decided to commission a violin concerto from Barber. Fels served on the board at Curtis and wanted Barber to write a concerto for a young violinist

whose career he was supporting, Iso Briselli. Briselli emigrated from Russia by way of Germany in 1924 to study at Curtis with Carl Flesch, the famous pedagogue when he was recruited to teach at Curtis. Fels offered to pay Barber \$1,000 (nearly \$20,000 in 2021 dollars) to compose a three-movement violin concerto, 15 minutes long. He paid Barber \$500 up front, with the other half promised upon delivery of the completed concerto on October 1. Briselli was set to perform the work with Philadelphia Orchestra under Ormandy in January 1940.

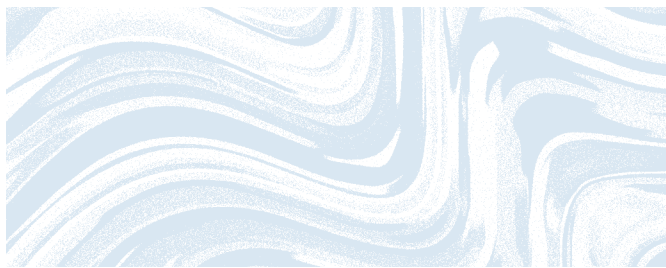
Barber started on the piece in the summer of 1939 in Sils-Maria, Switzerland. He had planned to complete the finale in Paris but had to leave Europe at the outbreak of WWII. Briselli brought the first two movements to his coach in New York City, Albert Meiff, in September 1939. Meiff was upset by the piece and wrote to Fels that the piece “bears a serious defect: it is not a composition gratifying for a violinist to perform.” He suggested a major overhaul of the first two movements. When Briselli finally received the music for the finale, both he and Meiff were sorely disappointed. Meiff thought it was too short and did not like the *perpetuum mobile* of the third movement, when the violin hardly stops playing at breakneck speed

over the course of the four-minute movement. Briselli, Fels, and Meiff each suggested that Barber revise his concerto, but Barber demurred. Eventually Briselli parted ways with Barber, and Fels pulled out of his commission, leaving Barber with only half his fee and no soloist.

Thankfully, the violinist Albert Spalding agreed to look at the concerto and liked it enough to eventually premiere the work with the same group as it had been originally promised to, in February 1941. Barber continued to revise the concerto over the next eight years, but far from the tepid reaction it engendered from its first listeners, the concerto has now become a part of the standard violin repertoire. 

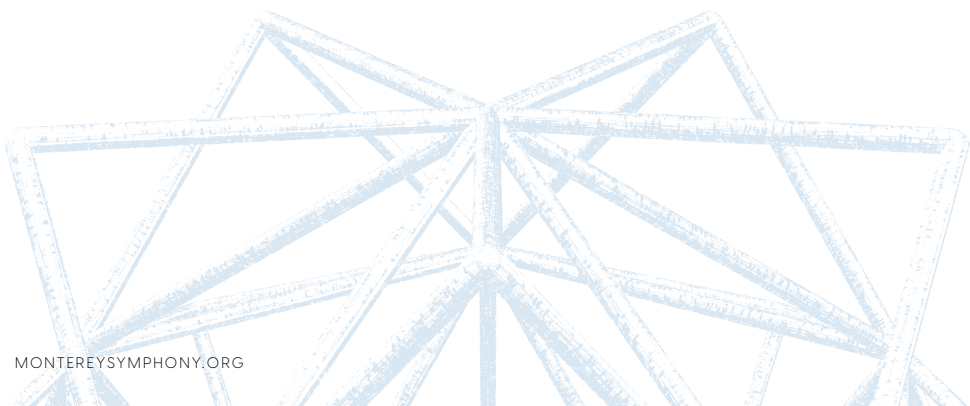
Aaron Copland

Symphony No. 3



Aaron Copland, affectionately known as the “Dean of American Composers,” wrote music that he hoped would appeal not only to the elite music aficionados of his day, but an “entirely new public for music that had grown up around the radio and phonograph.” Copland had dabbled in serialism and avant-garde atonality, but he realized that he would rather write music for the everyday American. “It made no sense,” he wrote, “to ignore them and continue writing as if they did not exist. I felt it was worth the effort to see if I couldn’t say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms.” To the musical sensibilities of the time, Copland’s music *sounded like America*.

This “American Pastoral” sound can be found in his Third Symphony. Although he pointed out that there was no folk or popular music in the symphony, Copland borrowed liberally from his earlier works. Despite this, the symphony did not come together immediately, but percolated over the course of three years and several composition retreats. In fact, the ink was barely dry on the finale when rehearsals started with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitzky in October 1946. It was Koussevitzky who commissioned the piece, in search of the next “Great American Symphony,” fifty years after Dvořák wrote his Symphony No. 9, “From the New World” that captured the ears of audiences around the world.



The first movement was composed in the summer of 1944, in Tepoztlan, Mexico. Each of the movements were composed at retreats in various locations. The opening movement forms the beginning of the arc of the symphony, where thematic material is first introduced and later finds its way back in the finale. The second movement is a scherzo, written in Bernardsville, NJ in the summer of 1945. Unlike the gentle opening of the symphony, the brass blaze the opening call, followed by a distinctly Copland-esque sound, reminiscent of his western ballet *Billy the Kid*. The third movement was composed during another retreat in the fall of 1945, in Ridgefield, CT. It is contemplative, breaking out into a dancelike segment toward the end, with contrapuntal similarities to his *Appalachian Spring* and dancelike character of *El Salón México*.

The finale was composed last but was Copland's first germ of an idea for the larger work. He wrote the movement at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, NH in June of 1946, but had to cut his retreat short to head to Tanglewood Music Center when it finally opened again after WWII. Copland had decided to incorporate his 1942 wartime anthem, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, into the movement shortly after composing the original piece. The movement opens quietly, with the woodwinds playing the *Fanfare* softly over rumbling low strings. And then, in full glory, the brass and percussion burst into the *Fanfare*. The piece garnered high praise from audience and critics alike, but none more than from its commissioner. Koussevitzky was thrilled with the Third Symphony. "There is no doubt about it," he wrote, "this is the greatest American Symphony. It goes from the heart to the heart." 

Dr. Alicia Mastromonaco

Assistant Principal horn



Alicia has played with the Monterey Symphony since 2007. She is also a member of the Carmel Bach Festival and Marin Symphony and plays in orchestras across the Bay Area. A San Francisco native, she began her music studies at age seven on the piano, sang in the San Francisco Girls Chorus, and took up the horn in middle school when she was given her uncle's old single B-flat Conn to try out (and fell in love with the instrument). Alicia earned Bachelor of Music degrees in Horn Performance and Musicology from Boston University, then did graduate work at the Universität der Künste Berlin before returning to California to continue her studies. She earned a Master of Music at University of California, Los Angeles in Horn performance, and a Master of Arts and PhD in Musicology from University of California, Santa Barbara.

Her dissertation, "Breakdown on the Freeway Philharmonic: Understanding the Causes and Effects of Regional Orchestra Bankruptcies in the San Francisco Bay Area," traces the history of the Oakland and San José Symphonies from their inception through their bankruptcies in 1988 and 2002, respectively, and provides socio-cultural analysis of the many factors facing the groups that led to their demise. She lives with her husband and two cats in El Cerrito and enjoys the many beautiful hiking trails just outside their door.

