

Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op. 24

Samuel Barber

When Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music opened its doors to receive its very first students, on October 1, 1924, Samuel Barber was second in line. (It was a violinist who managed to pass through the portal before him: Max Aronoff, who would later become well known as a member of the Curtis String Quartet.) Thanks to his studies there with the baritone Emilio de Gogorza, a Metropolitan Opera colleague of Barber's aunt Louise Homer (a contralto), he developed into a fine baritone himself, and his work under Rosario Scalero refined his technique as a composer. Writing for the voice represented the perfect confluence of his two musical vocations. Nonetheless, by the time Barber wrote *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* he had become famous thanks less to his songs than to such large-scale works as his two symphonies, concertos for violin and for cello, and B-minor String Quartet (especially when its slow movement took on an independent life as *Adagio for Strings*).

"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." These words, which stand inscribed but unsung at the head of Barber's score, are drawn from a prose poem by the author James Agee (1909–55), which the composer had found in an anthology of writings from *The Partisan Review*. The magazine had published it as an independent prose poem, although Agee later incorporated it as the prologue to his novel *A Death in the Family*. Barber identified with the text's images. He later recalled:

Agee's poem was vivid and moved me deeply, and my musical response was immediate and intense. ... The summer evening he describes ... reminded me so

much of similar evenings when I was a child at home.

In fact, when the composer finally met Agee, after he had finished this "lyric rhapsody," he discovered that their childhood memories agreed in certain particulars:

We both had back yards where our families used to lie in the long summer evenings, we each had an aunt who was a musician. I remember well my parents sitting on the porch, talking quietly as they rocked. And there was a trolley car with straw seats and a clanging bell called "The Dinky" that traveled up and down the main street.

In Short

Born: March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died: January 3, 1981, in New York City

Work composed: February through April 4, 1947; revised in 1950 into the chamber orchestra version performed here; dedicated "In memory of my father"

World premiere: original version for full symphony orchestra, April 9, 1948, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky, conductor, Eleanor Steber, soprano; chamber orchestra version, April 1, 1950, at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, by the Dumbarton Oaks Chamber Orchestra, William Strickland, conductor, Eleanor Steber, soprano

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 12, 1959, Thomas Schippers, conductor, Leontyne Price, soprano

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 8, 1997, Charles Dutoit, conductor, Barbara Hendricks, soprano

Estimated duration: ca. 16 minutes

The soprano Eleanor Steber, who commissioned the work and was the soloist at its premiere, insisted, “That was exactly my childhood in Wheeling, West Virginia.” Similarly, Leontyne Price, an indelible interpreter of the work who performed its New York Philharmonic premiere, said, “As a Southerner, it expresses everything I know about my roots and about my mama and father ... my home town. ... You can smell the South in it.” Knoxville, West Chester, Wheeling, the South — it could just as easily be anywhere in small-town America in the innocent years before World War I changed the nation forever.

Rather than set Agee’s text wholesale, Barber selected passages to craft into a libretto and then completed the musical composition in the space of a couple of months, finishing it on April 4, 1947. (He revised the score in 1950, reducing its instrumentation for the chamber orchestra forces used in this concert; this has become the standard

version.) Family was much on his mind at the time, as both his father and his aunt Louise were terminally ill. Louise Homer would die that May, and his father, to whose memory the work is dedicated, would follow three months later. *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* bears witness that Barber responded to these losses not with anger, but rather with tender contemplation and honest nostalgia.

The piece unrolls leisurely in a single movement. The soprano’s line captures the conversational flow of the text, while the chamber orchestra delicately evokes the charmed atmosphere — from the swaying of a porch rocker to the rattling of a streetcar — without ever resorting to cheap effects. Few pieces have ever sounded at once so simple and yet have been so unquestionably a masterpiece.

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), oboe (doubling English horn), clarinet, bassoon, two horns, trumpet, triangle, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo soprano.

Sources and Inspirations

On February 11, 1947, Barber wrote a letter to his uncle Sidney Homer (Louise Homer’s husband) reporting that he had finished *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (in fact, he would continue to work on it until early April):

I enclose the text of a new work, just finished, for lyric soprano and orchestra. The text moved me very much. It is by the same man who did “Sure on this Shining Night,” — James Agee. He also did a wonderful book on Southern share-croppers, with whom he lived in a spirit of humility and compassion (not the usual spirit of “social investigator”); it was called *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. I met him last week and admired him. This was actual prose, but I put it into lines

to make the rhythmic pattern clear. It reminded me so much of summer evenings in West Chester, now very far away, and all of you are in it!



Knoxville streetcar line, ca. 1915