

# Classical Series 3 - Program Notes

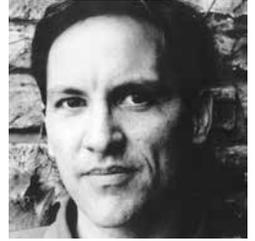
## Oswaldo Golijov

December 05, 1960

### Last Round

Oswaldo Speaks:

"I composed Last Round (the title is borrowed from a short story on boxing by Julio Cortázar) as an imaginary opportunity for the spirit of the last great tango composer, Astor Piazzolla, to fight one more time. The piece is conceived as an idealized bandoneon (a small accordion-like instrument without keyboard). There are two movements: the first represents the act of violent compression of the instrument and the second a final, seemingly endless opening sigh (it is actually a fantasy over the refrain of the song My Beloved Buenos Aires, composed by the legendary Carlos Gardel in the 1930s). But Last Round is also a sublimated tango dance. Two quartets confront each other, separated by the focal bass, with violins and violas standing up as in the traditional tango orchestras. The bows fly in the air as inverted legs in criss-crossed choreography, always attracting and repelling each other, always in danger of clashing, always avoiding it with the immutability that can only be acquired by transforming hot passion into pure pattern."



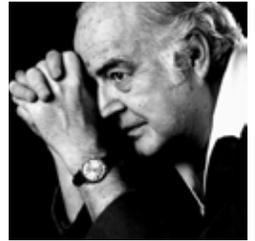
## Samuel Barber

March 9, 1910 – January 23, 1981

### Adagio for Strings

As inclined as I am to attempt to enhance our appreciation of a classical offering with a paragraph or two, I respectfully decline to say anything about Barber's Adagio for Strings. It glows with an elegiac intensity which transcends any attempt to salt and pepper it with words.

Composed in 1936 when Barber was only twenty-six years old, it has the distinction of being the Twentieth Century's most performed classical piece outside of the concert halls for which he wrote it. Arturo Toscanini premiered it with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in a radio broadcast, and it became one of his favorites. Olin Downes, one of the foremost music critics of his day, called it "honest music, by an honest musician, not striving for pretentious effect, not behaving as a writer would who, having a clear, short, popular word handy for his purpose, opened his thesaurus and fished out a long one." Bullseye!



### Knoxville: Summer of 1915

James Agee wrote Knoxville: Summer of 1915 as a poignant stream-of-consciousness retrospective on his blissful life as an innocent child in his hometown. He called his poem a "lyric rhapsody."

Because of the similarities of their childhoods, Agee's piece struck a chord with Barber. In a letter to his uncle, Barber said, "It reminds me so much of summer evenings in West Chester (Pennsylvania), now very far away, and all of you are in it." So when the soprano Eleanor Steber commissioned a work from him in 1947, Barber decided to set it to music.

I spent time as a child on my grandfather's farm near McConnellsburg, Pennsylvania, which is right around the mountain from West Chester. Think Mayberry, but without Barney, Gomer, and Goober. I enjoyed many summers in the world described by Agee and set to music by Barber. Their long-gone world was elegantly captured in an article in Time Magazine written in 2015: "One hundred years ago this month, a 5-year-old boy spread a quilt and lay with his parents on the grass of the backyard of their house in Knoxville, Tenn. On this summer night, he listened to the music of the evening – the murmur of neighbors talking on porches, the clop-clop of horses on the street, the hissing of hoses watering lawns, the rasping of locusts and crickets, and the flopping of a few frogs in the dewy grass. He watched the last fireflies flicker out and wondered who he was.

How do we know this? Because James Agee wrote it in his rapturous prose-poem, "Knoxville: Summer, of 1915," in 1938 at the age of 28. Agee said later that he had written its five pages in a breathless 90 minutes, as a way to experiment with free-form writing.

That summer was Agee's last in an intact family. A year later, in 1916, his father was killed in an automobile accident.

Agee was describing the lost world of porches and the closely knit communities that shared them. The shady, street-front verandas that were once an amenity on every American house were killed off by air-conditioning. By the 1950s, builders stopped putting porches on new houses, and families retreated indoors to their televisions. Today grandparents who once

sat in the rocking chairs on the porches of Knoxville are just as likely to be in an assisted living facility. And the people walking down the street are making eye contact not with their neighbors but with the smartphones in their hands.

All of these changes would appear to make Agee's writing very dated today — the verandas are gone. Yet what endures is perhaps more important: the nagging sense of lost community that they represented. Agee put into words and art a vision of small-town America that we often scoff at as a cliché...yet we continue to return to it. That it can still move us is proof that, while porches may go out of style, the deeper things that bind us endure. We still have something to learn from those summer evenings in Knoxville."

Barber's lush music begins with the dreamy sounds of a warm Southern summer evening. Agee with his lyrics and Barber with his music tell us of people sitting on their porches, "rocking gently and talking gently," watching their neighbors pass by. A horse, a buggy, two autos, and even a clown pass through the scene. Hypnotic triplets convey the relaxed atmosphere of Agee's idyllic community.

After a pause, a "moaning, stopping and starting, and belling" streetcar fractures the calm. Then it's back to parents relaxing on porches, morning glories, locusts, and a quiet time with family.

The poem ends with an existential reminder of our transient human condition: "May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away. After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever, but will not ever tell me who I am."

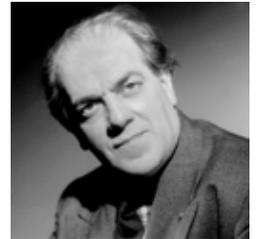
Agee's poem and Barber's music remind me of Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

## Heitor Villa-Lobos

March 5, 1887 – November 17, 1959

### **Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5**

If you were pursuing the genealogy of music from the Seventeenth Century to the present, all branches of the tree would track back in one form or another to Johann Sebastian Bach. Even Chris Thile who started as a child prodigy with American Bluegrass now plays Bach's sonatas and partitas on his mandolin. Thile's mandolin transcriptions are stunning. Look him up on YouTube.



The Brazilian composer Villa-Lobos fell under Bach's spell in the early part of his career. He wrote nine suites he called Brazilian Bach-Pieces. Villa-Lobos purpose was to pay "homage to Bach's great genius, who I consider a kind of universal folkloric source, rich and profound, linking all peoples of the world as a mediator of all races." The Bachianas magically fuse baroque technique with indigenous Brazilian rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic sources.

Bachiana Number 5, which Villa-Lobos called an Aria, features our guest soprano accompanied by eight cellos, in three parts. In part one, she uses her voice as a musical instrument to vocalize the melody above the rhythmic background in a manner which gives new meaning to the word "haunting." A solo cello then takes over, singing the melody in its own voice. This is song without words.

The second part is a poem set to music:

"Evening, a rosy, translucent cloud, slowly crosses the drowsy, beautiful heavens!

The moon gently rises into infinity, adorning the evening, like a sweet maiden dreamily getting ready, making herself beautiful, desiring her soul to be beautiful.

She calls to the heavens, the earth, to all of Nature.

She silences the birds' melancholy laments, and the sea reflects all her treasures.

Softly the moon awakens, a cruel yearning which laughs and weeps!

Evening, a rosy, translucent cloud, slowly crosses the drowsy, beautiful heavens!"

Part three reprises part one, but now quiet and subdued, awed by the universe so exquisitely portrayed in Correa's spellbinding poem.

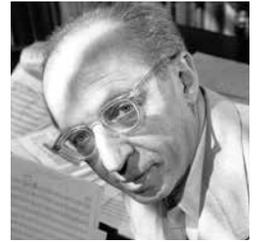
About his works, Villa-Lobos said, "My music is natural, like a waterfall." Jump right in.

# Aaron Copland

November 14, 1900 – December 2, 1990

## Three Latin-American Sketches

Does our evaluation of a composer change over time? You bet. In his day, Bach was dressed down for his “lack of amiability” and for “darkening the beauty of music with an excess of art.” The Emperor Joseph II dismissed Mozart as writing “too many notes” and excessively dissonant music. One critic called Beethoven “a madman who writes crazy music with occasional lucid intervals of bad taste.” Years later, we revere these titans as great masters.



So it was in the 1930s with Aaron Copland, now feted as the “Dean of American Composers” – but not then. The unsympathetic critics derived great satisfaction from savaging his early European-inspired “progressive” compositions, esoteric works he wrote after returning from his studies in France with the legendary Nadia Boulanger. American critics called his music uncouth, mocking, sour, empty. His piano concerto was described as “a concatenation of meaningless ugly sounds and distorted rhythms, displaying a shocking lack of taste,” “a harrowing horror from beginning to end.” Another critic said it was a “unique example of musical depravity which should be suppressed by the District Attorney.” In 1926, an audience hissed at his organ symphony, causing Walter Damrosch to say, “Ladies and gentlemen, when the gifted young American who wrote this symphony can compose at the age of twenty-three a work like this, it seems evident that in five years he will be ready to commit murder.”

But by the 1940’s, Copland had become a celebrity star. What slowly turned the page was his conscious decision to adopt a style that was more direct and economical, a style that would be more audience friendly. *Billy the Kid*, written in 1938, began the transformation, followed by such triumphs as *Rodeo*, *John Henry*, *Lincoln Portrait*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and *Appalachian Spring*. With these works, audiences and critics alike began to regard him as our premier composer. They described his new works as “recognizably American,” and “reflective of the American scene.” “He has succeeded in fixing in the mind of a large public an aural image of what America, and therefore American music, sounds like.” Recently, when asked why he used Copland’s music for a film about basketball, Director Spike Lee said, “When I listen to his music, I hear America, and basketball is America.” Ironically, one critic now complained that Copland had “sold out to the mongrel commercialists.” Go figure. Copland made no secret of the intent of his new style.

He said, “I would hope that my music is distinctly American because I want to write healthy-sounding music that’s an expression of the life we live – a zippy rhythm that nobody but an American would dream up, or a largeness of utterance that only a large country can produce.”

At the same time he was honing his distinctly American sound, however, he became fascinated with the rhythms and sounds coming from south of our border. He and the Mexican composer Carlos Chavez became good friends, and Copland began to spend lengthy periods of time in Mexico. Just as 19th and 20th Century European composers turned to the exotic sounds of Spain for inspiration, so did Copland with the sounds of Mexico and Central and South America.

The first manifestation of his growing interest in our southern was *El Salon Mexico*, written in 1936. During the twilight of his career, he wrote two of his *Three Latin America Sketches* in 1959 while residing in Acapulco. To convert these two miniatures into a significant concert piece, he added a third sketch in 1972 at the request of André Kostelanetz. As a group, the *Sketches* are the last pieces he wrote for orchestra.

The first of the three is *Estribillo*, based on a melody he heard in Venezuela. The second, *Paisaje (landscape) Mexicano*, is a lyrical, fond, and reflective look at the Mexican landscape; and the third, *Danza de Jalisco*, captures the essence of a traditional Mexican folk dance.

Yes, these three sketches evoke the sounds of the cultures from which they were distilled, but at the same time, they are rhythmically and stylistically unmistakable as vintage Copland. Enjoy.