

Conductor's Note

As summer begins here in Southern California, the La Jolla Symphony and Chorus brings a close to our season with a program steeped in the past. It's a fitting end to a season entitled "Lineage – A Memory Project." The Treaty of Versailles was signed in June of 1919, exactly five years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The entire planet was piecing itself back together after a conflict unlike any that had come before, and with no idea that another still lay ahead. One hundred years later, this program revisits the composers and soldiers of The Great War. This concert is a time for reflection, and we present the music together with words and poetry that were both inspired by and inspired the works that you will hear. We ask that you hold your applause to the end of each half of the concert.

Ravel's *La Valse* opens the program. It is an orchestral showpiece that demands virtuosity from every corner of the orchestra. Whether the composer intended it or not, the piece serves as a dazzling commentary on the state of Europe after the war. Ravel marks the beginning of the score "Mouvement de Valse viennoise" and, just like that, a listener emerges from a haze into a bright hall filled with whirling dancers. The energy of the dance becomes feverish, with outbursts from the brass and strange modulations that Johann Strauss would never dream of. The music rushes inexorably forward to its final bar, the only one not in three quarter time. Alex Ross put it this way, "This is a society spinning out of control, reeling from the horrors of the recent past toward those of the near future."

From Hanover Square North, is some of the most beautiful and poignant music that Charles Ives never heard in his own lifetime. It's a giant stew of tunes played in different keys and at different speeds. This is difficult music to understand on the page, but it makes perfect sense in the ear and the heart. The success of performance rests on the conviction that each musician brings to the song they've been given to sing. At its unmistakable climax, the voices sound together, performing an old hymn. In this performance, the chorus will join us in this moment of unity, before the music fades into silence and only the memory remains.

The first half of the program closes with Barber's *Adagio*, a piece written when Barber was only 26 years old in 1936. I think it's the upward leap of the strings, a pleading, and the shattering climax, a cry to the heavens, that have given this simple music such a profound power over listeners. The piece is an arch, ending much like it begins, but with an emphatic final statement from the violins.

Ralph Vaughan Williams was a friend and student of Ravel before the war. The two of them shared correspondence and served in the military during the conflict. His *Dona Nobis Pacem* was written in the same year as Barber's *Adagio* and is as much a warning as it is a meditation. While Vaughan Williams was surely influenced by his wartime experience, the materials of his cantata are reflections on both recent and ancient horrors. The Latin Mass provides only the title phrase, literally "give us peace," and a brief setting of the "Gloria." Between the pleas for

peace, we hear Whitman, the anti-war speeches of John Bright, and the lamentations of Jeremiah. This music is solemn, violent, mournful, and ultimately hopeful.

The program closes with the music of Vaughan Williams' dear friend George Butterworth. *The Banks of Green Willow* is a beautiful idyll for the symphony orchestra, filled with glorious solo playing from the winds and lush melodies in the strings. It is neither bold nor bombastic and may seem an odd choice to close the performance, but its power is undeniable. In a concert of works from the past, our final piece is one of the few works that survive by a composer who was robbed of a bright future.

Sir William Golding once wrote, "My yesterdays walk with me. They keep step, they are gray faces that peer over my shoulder." As we look back into the eyes of these gray faces, we find meaning for our lives today, and we still plead for peace. *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

Michael Gerdes