

PROGRAM NOTE by ERIC BROMBERGER

La valse

MAURICE RAVEL

Born March 7, 1875, Ciboure, Basses-Pyrennes

Died December 28, 1937, Paris

Though Ravel, like many French composers, was profoundly wary of German music, there was one German form for which he felt undiluted affection—the waltz. As a young piano student in Paris, Ravel fell under the spell of Schubert’s waltzes for piano, and this led him in 1911 to compose his own *Valses nobles et sentimentales*, a set of charming waltzes modeled on the Schubert dances he loved so much. Somewhat earlier—in 1906—Ravel had planned a great waltz for orchestra. His working title for this orchestral waltz was *Wien* (Vienna), but the piece was delayed and Ravel did not return to it until the fall of 1919. This was the year after the conclusion of World War I (Ravel had served as an ambulance driver in the French army during the war), and the French vision of the Germanic world was quite different now than it had been when Ravel originally conceived the piece. Nevertheless, he still felt the appeal of the project, and by December he was madly at work. To a friend he wrote: “I’m working again on *Wien*. It’s going great guns. I was able to take off at last, and in high gear.” The orchestration was completed the following March, and the first performance took place in Paris on December 12, 1920. By this time, perhaps wary of wartime associations, Ravel had renamed the piece *La valse*.

If *La valse* is one of Ravel’s most opulent and exciting scores, it is also one of his most troubling. Certainly the original conception was clear enough, and the composer left an exact description of what he was getting at: “Whirling clouds give glimpses, through rifts, of couples waltzing. The clouds scatter little by little. One sees an immense hall peopled with a twirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated. The light of chandeliers bursts forth fortissimo. An Imperial Court, about 1855.” The music gives us this scene exactly: out of the murky, misty beginning, we hear bits of waltz rhythms; gradually these come together and plunge into an animated waltz in D major. *La valse* offers dazzling writing for orchestra. Some of this is the result of the music’s rhythmic energy, some the result of Ravel’s keen ear for instrumental color—the waltzes can glide along the most delicate writing for solo strings, then suddenly rocket ahead on important solo parts for such unlikely instruments as trumpet and tuba. If *La valse* concluded

with all this elegant vitality, our sense of the music might be clear, but instead it drives to an ending full of frenzied violence, and we come away not so much exhilarated as shaken. Ravel made a telling comment about this conclusion: “I had intended this work to be a kind of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, with which was associated in my imagination an impression of a fantastic and fatal sort of dervish’s dance.”

Is this music a celebration of the waltz—or is it an exploration of the darker spirit behind the culture that created it? Many have opted for the latter explanation, hearing in *La valse* not a *Rosenkavalier*-like evocation of a more graceful era, but the snarling menace behind that elegance. Ravel himself was evasive about the ending. He was aware of the implications of the violent close, but in a letter to a friend he explained them quite differently: “Some people have seen in this piece the expression of a tragic affair; some have said that it represented the end of the Second Empire, others that it was postwar Vienna. They are wrong. Certainly, *La valse* is tragic, but in the Greek sense: it is a fatal spinning around, the expression of vertigo and the voluptuousness of the dance to the point of paroxysm.”

From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose

CHARLES IVES

Born October 20, 1874, Danbury, CT

Died May 19, 1954, New York City

Over the last century we have grown so accustomed to violence against civilian populations and to massive civilian casualties that we have become almost numb to them. The Holocaust, the bombing of cities, ethnic cleansing, terrorism—all have served to make attacks on innocents almost the norm rather than the outrage and horror they should be. This was not always the case, as an incident almost exactly a century ago makes clear. On May 7, 1915, the British passenger liner *Lusitania*, on its way from New York to Liverpool, was torpedoed by a German submarine off the southern coast of Ireland. The ship sank in eighteen minutes, and almost 1200 of the 1962 people on board were killed.

The *Lusitania* sank about 2:30 in the afternoon, which was morning in New York, and the appalling news quickly spread through the city. Charles Ives, then 40 years old, was working at his insurance firm in lower Manhattan, and as he left work that afternoon, he encountered an

unexpected and moving scene at the Hanover Square elevated train station. A hurdy-gurdy player on the platform began to play the old hymn tune “In the Sweet By and By,” gradually the crowd on the platform began to sing along with him, and soon everyone on the platform—shattered by the news of what had happened earlier in the day—joined in. Ives himself described the scene:

A workman with a shovel over his shoulder came on the platform and joined in the chorus, and the next man, a Wall Street banker with white spats and a cane, joined in it, and finally it seemed to me that everybody was singing this tune . . . as a natural outlet for what their feelings had been going through all day long. There was a feeling of dignity all through this. The hand-organ man seemed to sense this and wheeled the organ nearer the platform and kept it up fortissimo (and the chorus sounded out as though every man in New York must be joining in it). Then the first train came in and everybody crowded in, and the song gradually died out, but the effect on the crowd still showed. Almost nobody talked—the people acted as though they might be coming out of a church service. In going uptown, occasionally little groups would start singing or humming the tune.

That moment—a sudden fusion of grief, anguish, and community spirit—became the inspiration for *From Hanover Square North*, which Ives composed over the course of 1915. But Ives was Ives, and he did not set out to render the scene in the realistic way that Richard Strauss might have. Instead, the scene on the railway platform became the starting point for a musical meditation by Ives in which he registered the emotional impact of what he had witnessed.

Like much of Ives' music from these years, *From Hanover Square North* is multi-layered. It begins with the sound of an off-stage ensemble—chorus, horn, chimes, piano, strings—which creates a distant haze of sound, through which the chorus sings (in English) the first lines of the *Te Deum*: “We praise Thee, Oh God.” Gradually the main orchestra enters with entirely different music, and bits of familiar tunes begin to emerge from this complex texture: “Massa’s in de Cold, Cold Ground,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” “In the Sweet By and By,” and others. There are multiple layers here, with different instruments playing different music in different rhythms. Tensions increase, and at the climax winds and percussion stamp out “In the Sweet By and By.” Ives’ meaning is clear: out of chaos, the voice of the people emerges, rough and clear and strong, in a statement of faith. That sturdy tune concluded, the complex textures dissolve, and the music drifts into silence.

Ives eventually joined *From Hanover Square North* (as the third movement) to two other orchestral movements he had composed earlier to form his *Orchestral Set No. 2*. This music remained in manuscript throughout the rest of his life and was not performed until Morton Gould led the premiere with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in February 1967, thirteen years after Ives’ death. Ives never heard a note of it.

Adagio for Strings

SAMUEL BARBER

Born March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died January 23, 1981, New York City

Barber spent the summer and fall of 1936 in the small village of St. Wolfgang in the Tyrol. The 26-year-old composer had just completed a symphony, and now his thoughts turned to chamber music. The Curtis String Quartet, made up of friends from the Curtis Institute, was planning a European tour that fall, and they had invited Barber to compose a quartet for them to play on the tour. Barber struggled with it, however, and the *Quartet in B Minor*—as the three-movement quartet was called—was not ready for the Curtis to play; the Pro Arte Quartet gave the

first performance in Rome on December 14, 1936. Even before the quartet had been played, though, Barber knew that there was something extraordinary about its central movement, an *Adagio*. On September 13, 1936, he wrote to the cellist of the Curtis Quartet: “I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout!”

During the summers of these years, Barber and his friend Gian-Carlo Menotti had been visiting Arturo Toscanini at the conductor’s summer home at a villa on Lake Maggiore. In the summer of 1937, the conductor—who had just heard Barber’s *First Symphony* performed at the Salzburg Festival—asked to see some of his music, and the young composer sent Toscanini the manuscript scores of an *Essay for Orchestra* and of an arrangement for string orchestra he had made of the quartet’s slow movement. But then Barber heard nothing, and the scores were returned by mail, without comment. Stung, Barber refused to accompany Menotti when his friend went to say goodbye to the maestro at the end of the summer. Toscanini recognized what had happened and said to Menotti: “Tell him not to be mad. I’m not going to play one of his pieces, I’m going to play them both.” The conductor had memorized both scores and—not needing them—had simply sent them back; he did not ask to see them again until rehearsals were about to begin. Toscanini led the premiere of what had now come to be known as the *Adagio for Strings* on November 5, 1938. He liked this music well enough that he took it on the NBC Symphony’s tour of South America in 1940 and recorded it shortly after the beginning of World War II.

The *Adagio for Strings* takes the form of a long arch. It is built on only one theme, a slow and sinuous melody initially heard in the first violins. There is an “archaic” quality about this music that is easy to sense but difficult to define—Barber’s noble melody almost has something in common with medieval choral music (in fact, late in life Barber made a choral arrangement of the *Adagio for Strings*, setting the *Agnus Dei* text). The theme develops with slow but inexorable power, passing from section to section and gathering force with each repetition until finally it builds to a climax of great intensity. Here the music breaks off suddenly, falls away, and concludes on nearly inaudible fragments of the original theme.

The restrained and solemn character of the *Adagio* has led to its frequent use as mourning music, much to Barber’s distress. It was broadcast in both the United States and England immediately following the announcement of President Roosevelt’s death in 1945, and—ironically—it was performed by the New York Philharmonic to mark Barber’s own death in 1981.

More recently, the *Adagio* has almost become a victim of its own success: it seems fated to be used whenever someone needs music that sounds both “ceremonial” and “American,” and its obsessive use as part of the sound track of the motion picture *Platoon* is only one example. Perhaps the best way to hear this familiar music is to try—as much as possible—to scrape it free of these cultural accretions and to listen to the skill with which its young creator takes his solemn melody—still beautiful after countless hearings—and builds it to that powerful climax, then leads it through a long descent into silence.

Dona Nobis Pacem

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Born October 12, 1872, Down Ampney

Died August 26, 1958, London

In 1936 the Huddersfield Choral Society, one of England’s most distinguished choruses, invited Ralph Vaughan Williams to compose a large-scale piece for their centenary celebration that year. But the work he wrote for them—a cantata for soprano, baritone, chorus, and orchestra titled *Dona Nobis Pacem*—was anything but a celebration piece. By 1936 the clouds were gathering over Europe, and *Dona Nobis Pacem* (“Give Us Peace”) was the composer’s protest against war and a cry for peace at a time of growing international tension. Three years later, his worst fears would be realized.

Vaughan Williams assembled his own text for the cantata, drawing from quite varied sources: the Latin Mass, Walt Whitman’s collection of Civil War poems titled *Drum Taps*, excerpts from an anti-war speech by John Bright, and the Bible. Some have charged that this range of texts keeps the work from achieving a unity of statement; the fact that Vaughan Williams incorporated into *Dona Nobis Pacem* music that he had written nearly thirty years earlier has its effect on the cantata’s stylistic unity as well. Nevertheless, *Dona Nobis Pacem* remains an effective work. A heartfelt protest against a war that daily seemed more inevitable, it offers some compelling music, and certainly its interweaving modern war poems with ancient liturgical texts caught the attention of Benjamin Britten when he composed his *War Requiem* in 1961.

Vaughan Williams is usually thought a conservative among twentieth-century composers, but the harmonic language of *Dona Nobis Pacem* is remarkable. Much of the writing is intensely chromatic, with melodic lines stinging off each other to produce music that sounds full of

“wrong” notes. *Dona Nobis Pacem* came two years after Vaughan Williams’ savage *Fourth Symphony*, and while the cantata does not reproduce the abrasive sonority of that symphony, it can have an unsettling sound appropriate to its message.

The cantata divides into six interconnected sections. The soprano’s opening appeal for peace—“*Dona nobis pacem*”—floats with a silvery purity above rumblings far below. Her plea will return throughout *Dona Nobis Pacem*, but now it is suddenly shouldered aside by the sound of war. A military march, full of trumpets and drums, introduces Whitman’s “Beat! Beat! Drums!”, which shows war ripping apart everyday human activity as it smashes across the countryside. The sounds of battle trail off, and we are left with its aftermath, “Reconciliation.” Whitman had worked as a hospital orderly during the Civil War, caring for the wounded, and the baritone’s text tells of his encountering the body of an enemy soldier and gradually accepting their joint humanity; Vaughan Williams creates a particularly lovely falling cadence here on the repeated three-word phrase: “this soiled world.” The fourth section, “Dirge for Two Veterans,” has become the best-known music from *Dona Nobis Pacem* and is sometimes performed separately (this is the section Vaughan Williams had written earlier—he made a first draft of this music in 1911). The orchestra’s grim opening march is suddenly recognized as a funeral procession: a father and son—both casualties of the same battle—are to be buried together, and now their caskets are laid side by side in the moonlight. The solemn funeral march, which is soon violated by the sounds of battle, rises to a powerful climax, then falls back as the dead men receive blessing and moonlit burial, and the march trails into silence.

The fifth section—“The Angel of Death”—sets part of a speech given before the House of Commons in 1855 by the Quaker John Bright protesting England’s involvement in the Crimean War. The music seems lost in darkness as Vaughan Williams introduces Biblical texts bewailing the vulnerable state of humankind. And—finally—comes hope: a string tune very much like a ground bass rises from the depths of the orchestra, and basses open the final section by singing a vision of peace: “Nation shall not lift up a sword against nation.” This rises to a grandiose climax, and all seems set for a conventional ending, full of triumph and ringing bells. But Vaughan Williams undercuts this happy fervor at the end. The sounds of triumph fade away, the soprano’s opening “*Dona nobis pacem*” floats ethereally above the chorus’ “Good will toward men,” and the music subsides into silence on Vaughan Williams’ final prayer for peace.

The Banks of Green Willow

GEORGE BUTTERWORTH

Born July 12, 1885, London

Died August 5, 1916, Pozières

The son of the general manager of the North Eastern Railroad, George Butterworth received a classical education at Eton and Oxford and seemed headed for a career in law when his life took a sharp turn. Butterworth fell in love with English folk-music and folk-dances, and that love transformed his life: he gave up law and devoted himself to music, traveling across the English countryside with his friend Ralph Vaughan Williams to collect folk-songs. Butterworth was also a skilled folk-dancer and often performed on the stage.

Though he had studied piano and organ as a boy, Butterworth was largely self-trained as a composer, and his works grow directly out of his contact with the English countryside. These include settings of poems from A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* and several brief works for orchestra, including *Two English Idylls* and *The Banks of Green Willow*. Composed in 1913, *The Banks of Green Willow* might also be titled an "idyll," for it makes that same evocation of pastoral life in all its idealized simplicity and tranquility. Butterworth bases it on several old English folk melodies—the opening clarinet solo is one of these—and this music might be thought of as a brief fantasia on these themes, much as Vaughan Williams was to do in his *English Folksong Suite*. The melodies are treated in turn, and the music grows to a modest climax before falling away to end quietly.

The Banks of Green Willow was first performed on March 20, 1914, in London. Five months later World War I began, and Butterworth enlisted in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. He was shot dead by a sniper a few weeks after his 31st birthday during the Battle of the Somme, and in the furious fighting in the trenches over the next several days his body was never recovered. Vaughan Williams dedicated his "*London*" *Symphony* to Butterworth's memory.