

PROGRAM NOTES



Adagio For Strings

Samuel Barber

When asked to name the most prominent American composers, few come to mind as readily as Samuel Barber (1910–1981). Unlike George Gershwin or Aaron Copland, whose most broadly recognized works emerged in the 1930s and 40s in populist styles, Barber enjoyed consistent success throughout his lifelong career, writing in a variety of modern, high-art vocal and instrumental styles. His composing career started early: at seven years old, just one year after he began piano lessons, Barber completed his first composition. Three years later, he wrote a one-act operetta, setting a libretto by the family’s resident chef. At twelve years old, Barber was hired as the organist for a local church in the Philadelphia area. Indeed, it was clear from a young age that Barber was an exceptionally skilled musician and composer. Despite his parents’ hopes for him to be a quintessential all-American, football-playing boy, Barber was keenly aware of his calling and focused his attention on music. His career gained significant momentum when he was admitted to the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia as a 14-year old boy, where he studied piano, voice, conducting, and composition.

Barber’s early career was marked by exceptional success, and many of his works from this period are still performed in concert halls today. By far, his most successful work is the *Adagio for Strings*. Originally composed in 1936 as the second movement to his only string quartet, the twenty-six-year-old Barber arranged the *Adagio* for orchestra the same year. It was premiered two years later by the NBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by the legendary Arturo Toscanini, one of the most influential conductors of the late 19th and 20th centuries, on a radio broadcast by the NBC. Since its premiere, the *Adagio for Strings* has become renowned for its melancholic depth and spiritual resonance at times of mourning. It has been performed at the funerals of figures such as Albert Einstein and John F. Kennedy, at the BBC Proms following the September 11 attacks, and several other significant events. Beyond its mournful applications, orchestras around the world regularly perform the work for its emotional impact and timeless beauty.

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PROGRAM NOTES

to blend the lyricism and tonal richness of the Romantic era with a distinctly modern, twentieth-century sensibility. The *Adagio's* musical language pulls directly on the heart and stimulates the mind, leaving a profound impression with its juxtaposition of musical simplicity and emotional complexity. The opening melody persists and develops throughout the work, gently unfolding in stepwise motion as it develops over slow, shifting harmonies. As the melody progresses, the tension steadily builds and the mood becomes increasingly somber. In the moments leading to the climax, the bass voice drops out, and the upper voices climb to a high-register, fortissimo peak, resounding intensely like an anguished cry. After a brief and poignant pause, the opening melody returns softly, only to fade away with a low, whispered chord, unresolved and hanging in the air as a striking metaphor for the persistence of grief.

The Creation Mass

Franz Joseph Haydn

At the turn of the nineteenth-century, Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) was nearing the end of his illustrious career.

After over three decades of service at Esterháza, followed by a brief five-year stint enjoying massive success in England, the aging composer found himself at the height

of his international fame. In 1795, the composer returned to his position as Kapellmeister of Esterháza at the service of the newly crowned Nikolaus II, accepting a part-time role before retiring from composition altogether in 1803. It was during these final years that Haydn composed several of his famous large-scale works, including the oratorios *The Creation* in 1798 and *The Seasons* in 1801. As part of his duties under Nikolaus II, Haydn was required to compose a mass to mark the name day of the prince's wife, Princess Maria Hermenegild. In total, Haydn composed six masses for the princess between 1796 and 1802. In 1800, the prince excused Haydn from this obligation as the composer pained over *The Seasons*, striving to live up to the widespread success of *The Creation*.

The following year, 1801, Haydn produced the *Schöpfungsmesse* or the *Creation Mass*. Scholars Robert Demaree and Don Moses contend that Haydn began work on the mass as late as July 28, just over six weeks before its scheduled performance. Furthermore, Haydn was still recovering from an illness that had been prolonged by his intense work on *The Seasons*. Haydn reported that he had finally completed the mass in a personal letter dated two days before the performance. While one might assume that such rushed circumstances would compromise the quality of the work, the *Creation Mass* is Haydn's longest mass and certainly shows no sign of diminished creativity or craftsmanship. The work is one of many examples of the composer's stylistic maturity, embodying the resplendent aesthetic he had honed throughout his long, productive life.



PROGRAM NOTES

Early in the *Kyrie*, Haydn's mastery of orchestration is evident. As Demaree and Moses note, "here, Classical orchestration has come to a full flowering." Each musical family—both instrumental and vocal—is employed not just for its unique character, but also according to its strengths as a distinct and essential component of the whole ensemble. The movement begins with a quiet adagio introduction, slow and stately, before the alto soloist joins in after eight bars. The choir responds in full force with loud, march-like rhythms that set the stage for the jovial choral section that follows these contrasting interactions. The thematic ideas introduced in this opening section form the foundation for the remainder of the *Kyrie*, where soloists and choir engage in a dynamic dialogue, singing both with and to each other in expressive conversation.

The *Gloria* is similarly dynamic, as Haydn masterfully shifts between contrasting sections of convivial fanfare, ominous chorales, and exuberant rejoicing. Midway through, the mood changes dramatically as Haydn unexpectedly swaps the joy of the *Gloria* into a somber and repentant *Miserere*, featuring slower, dramatic solo vocal work and pensive choral lines. A brief quotation from *The Creation's* final duet between Adam and Eve appears here, which gives this mass its name. The *Gloria* concludes with a return to the movement's initial vivaciousness, ending with a decisive "amen."

Haydn continues to display his masterful compositional skills throughout the remaining movements as the interactions between the choir, orchestra, and soloists push the boundaries of the traditional mass form.

The cohesiveness of the Schöpfungsmesse is one of its defining features, yet each movement is distinct in its own right.

In the *Credo*, for instance, the organ provides a vivid sonic representation of doves, symbolizing the Holy Ghost. The orchestration of the *Sanctus* is strikingly original with a characteristic Haydnesque quality: the movement opens with a steady triplet pattern played by the violin, horn, and kettle drum. The timeless nature of the *Benedictus* text is matched in equal measure by Haydn's pastoral orchestration, allowing the blessing of the Lord to shine unobstructed. The concluding *Agnus Dei* is immensely powerful, a sincere and awe-inspiring plea for peace. Despite the *Schöpfungsmesse's* lack of fame relative to Haydn's most enduring works, his thirteenth mass bears the mark of a wonderfully creative composer, his pen guided by a lifetime of experience.

PROGRAM NOTES

Lux Aeterna

Morten Lauridsen



Morten Lauridsen (b. 1943) is one of the most illustrious American choral composers of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With five Grammy nominations, nine albums, and over 200 recordings of his works released to date, Lauridsen’s music has been heard worldwide—from the living room to the concert hall. Following a fifty-two-year tenure at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music, Lauridsen continues to make significant contributions to the choral arts through his compositions, post-retirement artistic residencies, and the students he has trained and inspired in his long career. The National Endowment for the Arts named Lauridsen an ‘American Choral Master’ in 2006, and in 2007, he received the National Medal of Arts in a White House ceremony:

“for his composition of radiant choral works combining musical beauty, power, and spiritual depth that have thrilled audiences worldwide.”

Premiered in 1997 during his residency with the Los Angeles Master Chorale, Lauridsen composed his choral cycle **Lux Aeterna** as a response to the twilight of his mother’s life. By invoking various sacred Latin texts that reference light and redemption, Lauridsen nods to the **Lux Aeterna** offering in the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, wherein God is asked to shine His eternal light on the deceased in their eternal rest. In a publication by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Lauridsen describes that he “found great personal comfort and solace in setting to music these timeless and wondrous words about Light, a universal symbol of illumination at all levels—spiritual, artistic, and intellectual.” Lauridsen’s **Lux Aeterna** is a breathtaking musical display of tranquility that matches perfectly the serene wonder conveyed in those timeless words.

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