

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
A JACOBS MASTERWORKS CONCERT
Jahja Ling, conductor**

May 11, 12 and 13, 2018

SAMUEL BARBER

Adagio for Strings

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Symphony No. 1: *Jeremiah*

Prophecy

Profanation

Lamentation

Kelly O'Connor, mezzo-soprano

INTERMISSION

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73: *Emperor*

Allegro

Adagio un poco moto

Rondo: Allegro, ma non troppo

Martin Helmchen, piano

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 Quartet to play; the Pro Arte Quartet eventually 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 soundtrack 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 its long descent into silence.

Symphony No. 1: *Jeremiah*

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Born August 25, 1918, Lawrence, MA

Died October 14, 1990, New York City

Leonard Bernstein graduated from Harvard in 1939, unsure about which course he should pursue: should he be a composer of classical music, a composer of shows, a song-writer, a conductor or a pianist? That fall he entered the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia for graduate study, and those months brought two other events of significance. In September Hitler invaded Poland, World War II began, and chaos descended on Europe. And that December Bernstein sketched a piece for mezzo-soprano and orchestra that he called a “Hebrew song.” Based on a text drawn from the Book of Lamentations, the piece lay unfinished while Bernstein continued his studies at Curtis.

Move ahead three years: in the fall of 1942 Bernstein learned of a composing competition sponsored by the New England Conservatory. Working as fast as he could, Bernstein revised his “Hebrew song,” composed two new, purely instrumental movements to precede it, and

assembled them as his First Symphony, which he titled *Jeremiah*. He barely got it done in time. The deadline was December 31, and in the desperate effort to finish in time Bernstein enlisted a small band of associates, including his sister Shirley, the composer David Diamond and the clarinetist David Oppenheim to help with the copying and editing. A friend rushed the manuscript to Boston and turned it in late on New Year's Eve. Bernstein's symphony did not win the competition (one wonders what happened to the piece that did), but something better happened. His conducting teacher at Curtis, the formidable Fritz Reiner, saw the score, liked it and invited Bernstein to conduct the premiere with Reiner's own orchestra, the Pittsburgh Symphony. That premiere – on January 28, 1944, with Jennie Tourel as soloist – was so successful that Bernstein was quickly invited to conduct his new symphony with the Boston Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony, Saint Louis Symphony and others. The New York Music Critics Circle subsequently named *Jeremiah* the outstanding new classical work of the 1944 season.

Bernstein drew his text for the last movement from the Book of Lamentations, Chapters 1, 4, and 5. Lamentations, attributed to the prophet Jeremiah but almost certainly not written by him, agonizes over the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar, questions whether God has turned against the Jews and wonders how they might re-establish a relationship. Bernstein's symphony, like Beethoven's Ninth and Mahler's *Resurrection* Symphony, opens with purely instrumental movements that are then completed by a finale whose text gives meaning to the entire symphonic journey. Bernstein did not want *Jeremiah* considered program music, and he offered a summary of his intentions:

As for programmatic meanings, the intention is...not one of literalness, but of emotional quality. Thus the first movement ("Prophecy") aims only to parallel in feeling the intensity of the prophet's pleas with his people; and the scherzo ("Profanation") to give a general sense of the destruction and chaos brought on by the pagan corruption within the priesthood and the people. The third movement ("Lamentation"), being a setting of a poetic text, is naturally a more literary conception. It is the cry of Jeremiah, as he mourns his beloved Jerusalem, ruined, pillaged and dishonored after his desperate efforts to save it.

Bernstein may not have wanted *Jeremiah* to be taken as program music, but it is impossible not to make a connection between the agonized text and what was happening in Europe during the

period it was composed. To newspaper reporters, Bernstein made that connection clear: “How can I be blind to the problems of my own people? I’d give everything I have to be able to strike a death blow at Fascism.”

SOME NOTES: Bernstein insisted that there was no specifically Jewish musical material in *Jeremiah*, but others have disagreed, making out traces of Hebrew cantillation, particularly in the second and third movements. Several people who saw the symphony in score before its premiere – including Serge Koussevitzky, Fritz Reiner and Bernstein’s own father Samuel – felt that it needed a fourth movement, one more consoling after the agonized lamentation that had gone before, but the 24-year-old composer refused, feeling that the symphony was emotionally correct in its three-movement form. Those interested in this music should know that in February 1945, a year after the premiere, Bernstein recorded *Jeremiah* with the Saint Louis Symphony and mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel. That performance has been remastered and is available on compact disc.

Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 73: *Emperor*

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

In the spring of 1809 Napoleon – intent upon consolidating his hold on Europe – went to war with Austria. He laid siege to Vienna in May, and after a brief bombardment the city surrendered to the French and was occupied through the remainder of the year. The royal family fled early in May and did not return until January 1810, but Beethoven remained behind throughout the shelling and occupation, and it was during this period that he completed his Fifth Piano Concerto. Some critics have been ready to take their cue from the French occupation and to understand the concerto as Beethoven’s response to it. Alfred Einstein identified what he called a “military character” in this music, and Maynard Solomon has particularized this, hearing “warlike rhythms, victory motifs, thrusting melodies and affirmative character” in it.

But – far from being swept up in the fervor of the fighting – Beethoven found the occupation a source of stress and depression. During the shelling, he hid in the basement of his brother Caspar’s house, where he wrapped his head in pillows to protect his ears. To his publishers, Beethoven wrote: “The course of events has affected my body and soul...Life around

me is wild and disturbing, nothing but drums, cannons, soldiers, misery of every sort.” The concerto he wrote during this period may be noble and powerful music, but it is noble and powerful in spite of the military occupation rather than because of it. And in fact, Beethoven had done much of the work on the concerto before the French army entered Vienna: his earliest sketches date from February 1809, and he appears to have had the concerto largely complete by April, before the fighting began.

Beethoven defies expectations from the opening instant of this music. The *Allegro* bursts to life with a resplendent E-flat Major chord for the whole orchestra, but this is not the start of the expected orchestral exposition. Instead, that chord opens the way for a cadenza by the solo piano, a cadenza that the orchestra punctuates twice more with powerful chords before sweeping into the movement’s main theme and the true exposition. This first movement is marked by a spaciousness and grandeur far removed from Beethoven’s misery over the fighting that wracked Vienna. This is music of shining sweep, built on two main ideas, both somewhat in the manner of marches: the strings’ vigorous main subject and a poised second theme, sounded first by the strings, then repeated memorably as a duet for horns. After so vigorous an exposition, the entrance of the piano feels understated, as it ruminates on the two main themes, but soon the piano part – full of octaves, wide leaps and runs – turns as difficult as it is brilliant. This *Allegro* is music of an unusual spaciousness: at a length of nearly 20 minutes, it is one of Beethoven’s longest first movements (and is longer than the final two movements combined). Beethoven maintains strict control: he does not allow the soloist the freedom to create his own cadenza but instead writes out a brief cadential treatment of the movement’s themes.

The *Adagio un poco mosso* transports us to a different world altogether. Gone is the energy of the first movement, and now we seem in the midst of sylvan calm. Beethoven moves to the remote key of B Major and mutes the strings, which sing the hymn-like main theme. There follow two extended variations on that rapt melody. The first, for piano over quiet accompaniment, might almost be labeled “Chopinesque” in its expressive freedom, while the second is for winds, embellished by the piano’s steady strands of sixteenths.

As he did in the Fourth Piano Concerto, Beethoven links the second and third movements, and that transition is made most effectively here. The second movement concludes on a low B, and then Beethoven drops everything one half-step to B-flat. Out of that expectant change, the piano begins, very gradually, to outline a melodic idea, which struggles to take shape

and direction. And then suddenly it does – it is as if these misty imaginings have been hit with an electric current that snaps them to vibrant life as the main theme of final movement. This *Allegro* is a vigorous rondo that alternates lyric episodes with some of Beethoven's most rhythmically-energized writing – this music always seems to want to dance. Near the close comes one of its most striking moments, a duet for piano and timpani, which taps out the movement's fundamental rhythm. And then the piano leaps up to energize the full orchestra, which concludes with one final recall of the rondo theme.

At the time he wrote this concerto, Beethoven was 38 and his hearing was deteriorating rapidly. It had become so weak by this time that he knew he could not give the first performance of the concerto – this is the only one of his piano concertos for which he did not give the premiere. That premiere had to wait two years after the concerto's completion: it took place in Leipzig on November 28, 1811, with Friedrich Schuster as soloist. That performance, which Beethoven did not attend, was a great success; a reviewer wrote that “It is without doubt one of the most original, imaginative, most effective but also one of the most difficult of all existing concertos...the crowded audience was soon put into such a state of enthusiasm that it could hardly content itself with the ordinary expressions of recognition and enjoyment.” But the Vienna premiere – on February 12, 1812, with Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny as soloist – did not have a success. One journal noted the difficulty of the music and suggested that “It can be understood and appreciated only by connoisseurs.”

The nickname “Emperor” did not originate with the composer, and Beethoven's denunciation of Napoleon's self-coronation several years earlier suggests that he would not have been sympathetic to it at all. Despite various theories, the source of that nickname remains unknown, and almost certainly Beethoven never heard this concerto referred to by the nickname that we use reflexively today.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

Samuel Barber's lovely *Adagio for Strings* has become a popular favorite, at least partially by having been placed as background music for numerous films and TV shows, a situation hardly considered by Toscanini when he lovingly conducted the music's premiere. Robert Shaw conducted it here for the first time in the summer of 1954. Jahja Ling led the seventh outing of this piece with the orchestra in the 2008-09 season. Bernstein's *Jeremiah* Symphony, his first, became an instant hit and was played by numerous orchestras as soon as the music became available. Bernstein had become that hot. His recording with the St. Louis Symphony quickly sold out of copies in its first printing. But the work is being given its first San Diego Symphony performance at these concerts.

In 1914, Wilhelm Kreuz, with Buren Schryock conducting the first San Diego Symphony Orchestra, gave local audiences their first hearing of Beethoven's great Fifth Piano Concerto, the *Emperor*. With the contemporary San Diego Symphony, Rudolf Serkin and Robert Shaw, 40 years later, gave later San Diego Symphony audiences their own first hearing of the piece. Justifiably popular, it has been heard since then at these concerts 21 times, most recently when Cristian Măcalaru conducted it with Jeremy Denk as soloist in the 2015-16 season.