

**Longwood Symphony Orchestra – March 13, 2010**  
**Ginastera, Barber, Debussy**  
**PROGRAM NOTES**  
**By Steven Ledbetter**

**ALBERTO GINASTERA**

***Ollantay, Three Symphonic Movements, Opus 17***

*Alberto Ginastera was born in Buenos Aires on April 11, 1916, Argentina, and died in Geneva, Switzerland, on June 25, 1983. He composed Ollantay in Buenos Aires in 1947. Erich Kleiber, to whom the work is dedicated, conducted the world premiere in Buenos Aires on October 29, 1949, with the orchestra of the Teatro Colón. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani plus percussion (xylophone, tambourine, cymbals, tamtam, triangle, bass drum, tenor drum, snare drum, maracas, and three Indian drums), harp, piano/celesta, and strings. Duration is about 14 minutes.*

Ginastera showed precocious musical gifts and began to take piano lessons at the age of seven; by fourteen he was composing, though he eventually destroyed most of his juvenilia. He first attracted widespread attention with two ballet scores, *Panambi* (1936) and *Estancia* (1941), both of which dealt with Argentine life and had a strong element of musical folklore enlivened by a brilliant ear for orchestral color and a strong sense of rhythm.

World War II caused Ginastera to postpone accepting a Guggenheim grant to study in the United States, but by 1945, as a result of Péron's rise to power, he was dismissed from his position at the national military academy. He spent the next several years in the United States, including a summer studying in Aaron Copland's class at Tanglewood. Though he returned to Argentina and worked at reforming the musical life of his native country, he spent most of his last years abroad, in the United States and Europe, owing to continuing political unrest at home. By the late 1950s he had established an international reputation, and many of his later works were commissioned by organizations north of the Rio Grande (two of his three operas, for example, had their first performances in Washington, D.C.).

Ginastera began with an outright nationalistic style, drawing upon folk melodies and dances for his early ballets and other works, while modeling his style on the music of such masters of musical folklore as Bartók and Stravinsky. By the late 1940s his nationalistic strain had become more subjective, presented in abstract musical genres rather than folk ballets, and expanded by musical elements current on the international scene. His later music tended toward twelve-tone constructional techniques, though without ever losing the coloristic imagination that first captured the world's attention.

*Ollantay* is one of the last scores of his nationalistic period. The imagery for the music comes from the *Popol Vuh*, or Council Book, an assemblage of Mayan myths of the creation and the legendary gods. An unknown Dominican missionary translated these old tales into Latin in the late 1550s at a mission in the highlands of what is today Guatemala, thus preserving the most important text of Mesoamerican literature known today.

*Ollantay* is the son of the Earth; he opposes Inca, the son of the Sun. When *Ollantay* attempts to rape Coyllur, the daughter of Inca, thereby profaning the Temple of the Virgins, Inca declares war on *Ollantay*, who resists for a time in his fortress, but who finally is defeated and killed. Ginastera divided the tale into three sections, which he described as follows:

I. *Paisaje de Ollantaytambo* (The Countryside of Ollantaytambo)

In the lonely night of Ollantaytambo, Ollantay emerges evoking the outcry of disappeared cities.

II. *Los Guerreros* (The Warriors)

The warriors of Ollantay dance while they prepare for war. Excited, they imitate the armies in battle.

### III. *La Muerte de Ollantay* (The Death of Ollantay)

Prisoner of Inca, Ollantay forecasts the destruction of the Empire and the disappearance of the race of the sons of the Sun. Ollantay dies and solitude invades the Andine valleys.

The first movement opens with a summons between in dialogue between flute and oboe with a marked native character. Lower strings, muted, play a chromatic passage that hints at the B-A-C-H theme often used by Bach in his own works. Pounding percussion brings in a powerful brass statement building up the B-A-C-H, then returning to the processional character of the opening material, but quite dark in color.

The second movement is a wildly vigorous warrior's dance (perhaps echoing *The Rite of Spring* at the outset), aggressive and brutal.

The calm after the battle suggests an eerie night scene. The dying Ollantay, in music that grows sterner and more fateful, predicts the fall of the Inca empire. The strings quietly sing the B-A-C-H figure against a steady shimmer of harp notes, and the opening flute and oboe summons returns, quietly, as if from a distance, punctuated with timpani notes that color the tranquility with a touch of unease. A crescendo builds to a final brief outburst, and the dark, quiet sonorities die away in an epic past.

## **SAMUEL BARBER**

### **Violin Concerto, Opus 14**

Samuel Barber was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, on March 9, 1910, and died in New York, on January 23, 1981. He composed the Violin Concerto in the spring of 1939, on a commission from Samuel Fels. Albert Spalding gave the first performance, with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of Eugene Ormandy, on February 7 and 8, 1941. In addition to the solo violin, the score calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, and trumpets, plus timpani, percussion, piano, and strings. Duration is about 25 minutes.

Samuel Barber grew up in a musical family. His aunt was the great contralto Louise Homer, whose husband, Sidney Homer, was a composer. Barber began play the piano at six and compose the following year. Still, it was with some trepidation that he left a note on his mother's dresser when he was about eight to tell her of his self-realization: "To begin with, I was not meant to be an athlete [sic] I was meant to be a composer. and I will be, I'm sure...Don't ask me to try to forget this...and go play foot-ball." It was Sam's uncle Sidney who encouraged his composition most with letters full of advice. By the time the boy was seventeen, his aunt had begun including some of his early songs on her recital programs.

Barber's musical technique was formally developed during the eight years he spent as a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he joined its first class in 1924 (when he was just fourteen). There he studied piano, composition (with Rosario Scalero), conducting (with Fritz Reiner), and voice. For a time he contemplated the idea of a career as a professional singer (and, in fact, he once recorded the baritone part in his *Dover Beach* for string quartet and voice, a performance that is still available on New World Records). But it was primarily as a composer that he developed during his Curtis years.

Barber's style was always conservative, emphasizing the long lyrical line and relatively traditional tonal harmonies. His setting of language was felicitous, and his ear for color acute. All of these strengths made him for many years one of the most popular of American composers. Though changes in the American musical world after World War II gradually made Barber feel that he was an outsider who had been passed by, his music has been heard more frequently again in recent years and appreciated for its craft and expressive directness.

Barber composed his Violin Concerto quite early in his career, after he had sprung to instant prominence when Arturo Toscanini performed two of his works (Toscanini had a reputation for not being interested in American music, so his support for the young composer was doubly impressive). This led to his first major

commission, from Samuel Fels, the maker of Fels Naphtha Soap and a trustee of the Curtis Institute. Fels's adopted son was the violinist Iso Briselli; it was for him that Fels offered Barber \$1,000, in the spring of 1939, for a violin concerto.

Barber worked on the piece during the summer in Switzerland. He had intended to spend the fall in Paris, but the outbreak of war on September 1 made it imperative to return home. He completed the finale in the early fall. Unfortunate differences of opinion between Barber and Briselli threatened to break the contract and leave the composer without his full fee (he had been paid half in advance). When Briselli saw the first two movements in draft, he complained that they were "too simple and not brilliant enough," but this did not bother Barber much, because he intended to close with a virtuosic finale that would provide plenty of flash.

Yet when the finale was delivered, Briselli objected again. The story has been told for a long time that he declared it unplayable. Later he insisted that his only objection was that he found it ineffective. But in any case, a test was held at the Curtis Institute to convince Fels that Barber had in fact completed his side of the deal. A young violinist there, Herbert Baumel, was given a copy of the soloist's part of the last movement and told that he had two hours to learn it and that he should return dressed to play it (with a pianist) for a few people. The result was the complete vindication of Barber. Fels paid the remainder of the commission, and Briselli relinquished the right of the first performance. Ever afterward, Barber liked to refer to the piece as the "concerto del sapone," or "soap concerto."

The work was finally premiered by Albert Spalding with the Philadelphia Orchestra on February 7 and 8, 1941, to wide acclaim, and since that time it has become by far the most often performed and recorded violin concerto by an American composer. In 1948 Barber made a few alterations to the score to strengthen the climax in the slow movement and clarify what he found to be some "muddy orchestration" in the finale. When he heard Ruth Posselt play the revised version with the Boston Symphony at the beginning of 1949, he declared to Sidney Homer that it was "much improved" though in fact he had merely touched up a few orchestral passages. The revised version is always performed now.

Barber plays to his strengths as a lyricist throughout the first two movements. The soloist enters in the first bar, singing sweetly, and the movement continues to unfold with only a few outbursts from the orchestra, mostly growing out of the contrasting figure, lightly syncopated, first heard in the clarinet soon after the opening.

The slow movement is one of the great lyrical effusions in American music. Of course Barber had already written his famous Adagio for strings (that was one of the works Toscanini had performed) and thus demonstrated his command of the long, lush melodic line, which is also characteristic of this movement. The solo violin here waits through a preparatory passage in the orchestra highlighting the sweet sadness of what is to come, and then enters pensively, building quickly to a subdued passion that dominates the flow of the movement. (Barber added a few double-stops in the solo part, possibly as a result of Briselli's complaint of the movement's simplicity, but for the most part the instrument sings throughout.) The movement builds gradually to its expressive climax, then sinks back to the delicate world from which it sprang.

The finale is the shortest movement of all, but its lean athleticism provides a superb foil to the sweet and dreamy romanticism of what preceded it and provides a most effective close.

## **CLAUDE DEBUSSY**

### ***La mer*, Three symphonic sketches**

*Achille-Claude Debussy was born at St. Germain-en-Laye on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918. He began work on La Mer during the summer of 1903 and completed the score in March 1905, though he continued to make revisions for many years. Camille Chevillard conducted the Lamoureux Orchestra in the first performance on October 15, 1905, in Paris. La Mer is scored for two flutes and*

*piccolo*, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons and contrabassoon (the latter in the third movement only), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, bass tuba, timpani, cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, glockenspiel, bass drum, two harps, and strings. The string section Debussy hoped for but can rarely, if ever, have found, was an unusually large one, including sixteen cellos.

Debussy's parents planned a sailor's career for their son, but these ended when the woman giving piano lessons to the 9-year-old boy discovered his musical talent; within a year he was studying piano and theory at the Paris Conservatoire.

In the meantime, Debussy's memories of the sea were charged with images drawn from literature and art. He may have considered a "sea symphony" as early as the 1890s, but the first clear reference to *La Mer* comes from a letter of September 12, 1903, to André Messager: "I am working on three symphonic sketches under the title *La Mer: Mer belle aux Iles Sanguinaires; Jeux de vagues; and Le Vent fait danser la mer.*" Only the second of these titles ("Play of the waves") remained in the final version. The first came from a story by Mauclair (changed in the end to "From dawn to noon on the sea"); the last ("The wind makes the sea dance") was later turned into the rather more neutral "Dialogue of the wind and the sea."

But the most direct inspiration for *La Mer* was probably from art. Debussy had admired the sea paintings of Turner, with their misty impalpability, which had been on display in Paris and which he may also have seen during London visits in 1902 and 1903, shortly before he began composing *La Mer*. Still more influential were the Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige, whose work became enormously popular in France by the end of the nineteenth century. When the score of *La Mer* was published, Debussy requested that the cover design include a detail of Hokusai's most famous print, "The hollow of the wave off Kanagawa," the part showing the giant wave towering above and starting to curve over in its downward fall, its foaming billows frozen in a stylized pattern that almost resembles leaves on a tree.

Debussy came to *La Mer* soon after the great success of his one completed opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, performed with great success in April 1902. He may have expected *La Mer* to be even more successful, if only because the music was more assertive. Debussy modestly called *La Mer* "three symphonic sketches," but it is a full-fledged symphony and has been called the greatest symphony ever written by a French composer. But the work at its premiere caused violent controversy, with assessments ranging from "the composer's finest work" to "lifeless as dried plants in a herbarium." The mixed impression was reversed when Debussy himself conducted *La Mer* in January 1908—even though he had never before conducted an orchestra.

*La Mer* has never been amenable to the simple summaries such as "sonata form" that can at least give direction to the listener's perceptions of, say, a classical symphony. The use of orchestral color is more immediately identifiable than melodic shapes, though these play a crucial role in the work as well, and the harmonies are *sui generis*.

The first movement's title, "From Dawn to Noon on the Sea," indicates a progression from near darkness, in which objects are indistinct, to brightness, in which they are clearly perceptible. (Debussy's friend Erik Satie, always a joker, and one who loved inventing elaborate titles for his own music, once commented to Debussy that he "particularly liked the bit at a quarter to eleven.") Debussy's pictorialism is wonderfully evocative in its suggestion of indistinct outlines that gradually appear to view, the light evidently breaking forth in the undulating tremolos of the strings just at the moment that the principal key, D-flat major, is established. A striking change comes with a new theme in the cellos, which seem at first to bring the motion to a halt and then to proceed in wavelike triplets, which build to the movement's climax.

The second movement, "Play of the Waves," is a lighter scherzo, scored with extreme delicacy. It is an interlude between the storm and emphatic passions of the first and last movements.

"Dialogue of the Wind and the Sea" begins with an evident pictorial image: the waves softly surging up in the low strings, answered by the winds—the woodwinds, in fact—blowing high up in chromatic shrieks.

The struggle of wind and waves is developed at length, turning to material drawn from the opening movement, and building to a brilliant sunlit conclusion.

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