

## ***The White Peacock***

**Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1894–1920)**

Written: 1915–1919

Movements: One

Style: American-impressionism

Duration: Six minutes

Like virtually every young American in the early 1900s who wanted a career in music, Charles Griffes went to study in Germany. However, it was one thing to be an accomplished young pianist in Elmira, New York, and quite another to be thrown in with the wolves at the Mecca of music, Germany. Charles realized that his late start on the piano was too much to overcome so he shifted his emphasis towards composition. While there, Griffes soaked up the music of the masters: Wagner, Richard Strauss and Brahms. He took lessons from Engelbert Humperdinck of *Hansel and Gretel* fame.

The death of Charles's father forced him to return home to support his family. He took a job at the Hackley School in Terrytown, New York, teaching "bored and boring rich boys how to play the piano." His proximity to New York City allowed him to hear new music and others to hear him. After several years, Charles changed course in style, abandoning the Germanic style for the French impressionist style. Orientalism also began to interest him. Compositions that he wrote in his early thirties, *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*, *Sho-jo*, and *The White Peacock*, all resulted from this new direction.

During Charles' stay in Berlin, he visited the zoo. "Among the peacocks, was a pure white one—very curious," he wrote. That started his fascination with peacocks. (He wasn't alone. The peacock has long been a subject for art, representing both ideal beauty and the mysticism of the east.) *The White Peacock*, a poem by Fiona MacLeod (the alias of William Sharp), served as the inspiration for a short piano piece that Griffes wrote in 1915. He orchestrated it in 1919 for a ballet. Griffes wrote a short description for a performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra in the same year:

It pictures a wonderful garden filled with gorgeous color, where a white peacock moves about slowly "as the soul, as the breath of all this beauty." The music tries to evoke the thousand colors of the garden and the almost weird beauty of the peacock amid these surroundings.

He never heard that performance; he was too ill from lung disease. That, and the influenza epidemic of 1919, claimed his life less than four months later.

### ***Symphony No. 1, Op. 9***

**Samuel Barber (1910-1981)**

Written: 1936 (Revised in 1942)

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: Eighteen minutes

The movie "Platoon" reintroduced the music of Samuel Barber to much of the public. He is one of the most important American composers from the middle of the twentieth century. Unlike his peers, he was not a modernist. Instead, he combined a romantic lyricism with a sure handling of classical forms, much as Brahms had done several generations earlier. His famous *Adagio for Strings* (used in the movie) is an example of this.

Most symphonies contain four individual movements. When Barber composed his *First Symphony*, he used as his model the *Seventh Symphony* by Sibelius. Both works are, in essence, sort of a *Reader's Digest* of symphonies, where the normal four movements are compressed into one continuous movement, and where all of the themes are presented at the outset.

There are three main themes in Barber's *Symphony No. 1*. The strings state the first one. It is an angular melody, characterized by large melodic leaps. The second is much more lyrical, played by the violas and English horn. The woodwinds join the string section to introduce the third that combines the angularity of the first and the lyricism of the second. The symphony spends a short while developing those themes, but instead of then restating them as in a normal symphony, it proceeds directly to what would be the second movement, a scherzo. The theme of this section is none other than the first theme of the symphony, this time in much shorter and faster notes. You'll hear it first as a fugue with the second violins following the first violins.

The symphony then transitions into what would be the slower third movement. The oboe plays the second theme, this time in slower and longer notes. After a long and intense build-up, the final section begins. The first tune of the symphony is played in very slow notes, over and over again, by the cellos and basses. Over this, Barber weaves the third theme along with short melodic fragments from the other themes. Overall, Barber manages to distill into one continuous form the essence of all that makes up a symphony.

### ***Daphnis et Chloe***

**Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)**

Written: 1909-11

Style: Impressionistic

Duration: 58 minutes

We have a ballet impresario—who Stravinsky likened to a "circus ringmaster"—to thank for many of the monuments of early 20<sup>th</sup> century music. In the space of only ten years—from 1910 to 1920—Sergey Dyagilev set the course of new music with his company, the *Ballets Russes*. He commissioned leading composers such as Stravinsky, Debussy, Satie, Falla, and

Prokofiev; choreographers such as Fokine, Nizhinsky, Massin, and Balanchine; and artists such as Bakst and Picasso, to collaborate on his ballet productions. The result: Stravinsky's *Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, *The Rite of Spring*, *The Nightingale*, and *Pulcinella*; Debussy's *Jeux*; Satie's *Parade*; Prokofiev's *The Prodigal Son*; Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe* and many more.

Dyagilev heard Ravel's music during the *Ballets Russes'* first season in Paris. Shortly after that, he hired him to write the music for Fokine's setting of the Greek legend of Daphnis and Chloe. It was not an easy production. Ravel took three full years to compose the work, and still Dyagilev wasn't satisfied with it. He threatened to cancel the whole production. The choreographer Fokine and the great dancer Nijinsky came to blows over the choreography. The final rehearsals were full of acrimony. Finally, after a major blow-up between Dyagilev and Fokine, the premiere happened.

Ravel divided the ballet into two suites for concert use; the second suite is the one most often performed on orchestra concerts. Tonight you will hear the entire ballet.

The first part of the ballet introduces Daphnis and Chloe, two orphans raised by shepherds. In spite of flirtations with others, the two fall in love. Daphnis teaches Chloe how to play the panpipes. Pirates abduct Chloe, and Daphnis appeals to Pan for help. The pirates bring Chloe to their camp and order her to dance. As she dances, she tries to escape. Pan enters the camp and rescues Chloe. Shepherds awaken Daphnis and bring Chloe to him. The two re-enact the story of Pan and Syrinx and then get married at the altar of the nymphs. A wild *bacchanale* ensues.

In spite of an all-star cast of dancers, choreographer, set designer and composer, the premiere of *Daphnis* was not a great success. The music, however, remains as some of the most beautiful and evocative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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