

## **Musica Celestis**

**Aaron Jay Kernis (1960–)**

Written: 1990

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: Thirteen minutes

*Musica Celestis* shares some interesting similarities with one of the most beloved (and listened-to) pieces of American orchestral literature: Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. The most obvious is that both are arrangements of the slow movements taken from each composer's first string quartet. A second similarity is that both composers, born a half-century apart, can be called "neo-romantic" – a style that stands in direct contrast to many other modern trends in music. It is traditional, conservative and, often, *tonal*.

Aaron Jay Kernis was born in Philadelphia and attended the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, the Manhattan School of Music and the Yale School of Music. At the age of sixteen, he won the first of three BMI Foundation Student Composer Awards, one of the most prestigious prizes for young composers. He is one of the youngest composers to be awarded the Grawemeyer Award, a Pulitzer Prize and a Grammy nomination. He currently teaches at the Yale School of Music.

Kernis started composing his *String Quartet No. 1* when he "began realizing that [he] wanted everything to be included in music: soaring melody, consonance, tension, dissonance, drive, relaxation, color, strong harmony, and form—and for every possible emotion to be elicited." He adapted the quartet's slow movement for string orchestra. His notes for *Musica Celestis* state that it is inspired by the medieval conception of that phrase which refers to the singing of the angels in heaven in praise of God without end. ("The office of singing pleases God if it is performed with an attentive mind, when in this way we imitate the choirs of angels who are said to sing the Lord's praises without ceasing." —Aurelian of Réôme, translated by Barbara Newman.) I don't particularly believe in angels, but found this to be a potent image that has been reinforced by listening to a good deal of medieval music, especially the soaring work of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179). This movement follows a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern through a number of variations and modulations, and is framed by an introduction and codas.

Like the Barber *Adagio*, *Musica Celestis*, begins very quietly, builds to a "high, intense, and impassioned climax, and subsides to a quiet conclusion." Written just twenty-eight years ago, *Musica Celesta* hasn't reached that level of popularity of Barber's *Adagio* – yet!

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## ***Symphonic Suite from "On the Waterfront"***

**Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)**

Written: 1954

Movements: One

Style: Symphonic film score

Duration: 22 minutes

“I coulda been somebody, Charlie, instead of a bum, which is what I am.” Brando’s immortal line captured the changing social perceptions of 1950’s urban America. It is no wonder that after Leonard Bernstein viewed “On the Waterfront” he offered to write the music. It’s a story about a big-hearted average guy with big dreams, locked into a situation he doesn’t really understand by a code of honor he doesn’t quite embrace. Sound familiar? Remember Tony and Maria from Bernstein’s *West Side Story*? After the score received an Oscar nomination, Bernstein admitted that setting the mood for an already completed film was probably the most difficult work he had ever tried to do. “It has often been said that the best dramatic background music for a motion picture is that which is not heard . . . at least, not consciously heard.” Being in the background was never easy for Bernstein.

The *Symphonic Suite from “On the Waterfront”* is composed entirely of just such background music. There is no clearly recognizable “theme song,” as is the case with Bernstein’s *West Side Story*, *Candide* or *On the Town*. However, the *Suite* does adhere closely to the melodic material introduced in the first few measures by the solo French horn. The music evokes several moods: the sorrow of the opening, the fear and danger of life on the piers in the early drum sequence, the frustration and hopeful longing of the flute and harp, and the resolute optimism of the work’s conclusion.

“On the Waterfront” is Bernstein’s only film score. By transcending the particular story of the film for which it was written, the music depicts a larger slice of American life—the urban America of Bernstein himself, with its fast pace, fears, loneliness, and dreams.

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***Concerto for Violin in A Minor, Op.53***

**Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)**

Written: 1879–82

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

“I am just an ordinary Czech musician,” Antonín Dvořák insisted just as his career was reaching its peak. He may have started out as an ordinary Czech musician, but he certainly didn’t finish that way. His father was a butcher in a small village near Prague. Antonín learned how to play the violin when he was quite young and left home—against his father’s wishes—when he was thirteen to study music in Zlonice. He developed his “chops” to the point that he could play viola in the town orchestra. Three years later, he moved to Prague to continue his studies. Eventually, he became the principal violist at

the National Theater. In 1878, he wrote the *Slavonic Dances*. They made his publisher a small fortune and they made Dvořák famous throughout Europe.

Dvořák began writing his *Violin Concerto* the year after he wrote those *Slavonic Dances* and in the same year that Joseph Joachim premiered Brahms's *Violin Concerto*. Joachim was the "go-to guy" for all things violin, so when Dvořák completed the concerto he sent it to him. Two years later, Dvořák visited Joachim to pin him down. Dvořák sent a report to his publisher: "It pleased him . . . as for me, I am glad that at last the whole business is finished. . . . He was so kind as to make over the solo part, and only in the Finale have I to make a few alterations and in some places to lighten the instrumentation." Interestingly, even though Dvořák dedicated the concerto to him, Joachim never played the concerto in public.

The orchestra boldly introduces the first movement of the concerto and then the violin responds with two cadenza-like statements. The principal melody predominates the first movement, at times robustly and other times more lyrically. There is a beautiful secondary theme, melancholy and pastoral in character. Just before there should be a typical restatement of the themes, there is a sudden shift into the second movement without any pause. This contains beautiful expressive melodies interrupted by some quick changes of mood and key. Three lively melodies alternate throughout the third movement, often intentionally confusing duple and triple meters. Throughout Dvořák seems to be recalling those *Slavonic Dances* that made him so famous.

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***Suite from "Billy the Kid"***

**Aaron Copland (1900–1990)**

Written: 1938

Movements: One (with eight connected scenes)

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: Twenty minutes

In spite of Aaron Copland's popularity nowadays, the general public didn't particularly like his music when he was young. "People forget now that when I began in the twenties, I was considered to be a wild-eyed radical in musical terms," he states. "I got consistently razzed in the newspaper." When he was in his thirties, however, he "felt that it was worth the effort to see if I couldn't say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms."

The works that best demonstrate his change in style are his three brilliant scores for ballet: *Billy the Kid*, *Rodeo*, and *Appalachian Spring*. In all three of those works, Copland included actual American folk songs. And if it

isn't quoting folk song, there is something about the music—the open intervals, the off-beat and syncopated rhythms, and the shape of the melody that makes it sound “American.”

In 1938, Lincoln Kirstein asked Copland to collaborate with the choreographer Eugene Loring on a ballet about the famous western outlaw “Billy the Kid” for Ballet Caravan (the touring version of the American Ballet). He gave Loring Walter Noble Burns’s book *The Saga of Billy the Kid* saying “Here! See if you can make a ballet out of it.” He gave Copland several collections of cowboy music. “I have never been particularly impressed with the musical beauties of the cowboy song as such,” Copland later wrote. Nonetheless, Copland took the songs along when he went to Paris. “Perhaps there is something different about a cowboy song in Paris. . . . It wasn’t very long before I found myself hopelessly involved in expanding, contracting, rearranging and superimposing cowboy tunes on the rue de Rennes in Paris.”

The ballet that eventually resulted begins with an expansive depiction of “The Open Prairie.” It then goes on to depict various scenes from Billy’s life: A stray bullet kills his mother and Billy stabs her killer; he goes on the run, lives in the desert, and is captured by a posse. He steals a gun from a warden during a card game and escapes. Eventually, Sherriff Pat Garrett kills him. The ballet ends as it began on the open prairie. The suite that Copland extracted kept all the main elements and those cowboy tunes.

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