Music from West Side Story

Thursday, January 16 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor
D.T. Baker, narrator

BARBER
Overture to *The School for Scandal* (8')*

COPLAND
A Lincoln Portrait (14')*

HANSON
***Merry Mount*: Suite** (18')*
- Overture
- Children's Dance
- Love Duet
- Prelude to Act II and Maypole Dances

INTERMISSION (20 minutes)

COPLAND
Fanfare for the Common Man (3')*

MAZZOLI
River Rouge Transfiguration (10')*

BERNSTEIN
***West Side Story*: Symphonic Dances** (22')*

program subject to change
*indicates approximate performance duration

Samuel Barber (1910-1981) was among the first class of students when the Curtis Institute of Music opened its doors in the largest city in his home state of Pennsylvania. In addition to all his classes in music (theory, composition, and voice), young Barber had a class schedule that included courses in literature and other subjects. He took to all of them with the same passion and enthusiasm as he did his

music studies, and he became fascinated with the 1777 comedy of manners by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, ***The School for Scandal***, widely regarded as one of the finest examples of its type ever written.

Inspired by its wit and vivacity, Barber attempted to capture its spirt in a short orchestral overture that he wrote as a student piece. He had it ready by 1931, but it would not be until two years later that the work would be presented publicly – at an outdoor concert with the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by Walter Damrosch. Full of wit of its own, including numerous playful rhythms, clever dissonances that mirror the barbed humour of the play's dialog, and – as would be a constant in Barber's music – a lovely melody, heard first in the oboe and repeated later on the English horn.

In 1942, shortly after U.S. involvement in the Second World War, conductor André Kostelanetz commissioned patriotic works from a number of prominent American composers – pieces inspired by great Americans. **Aaron Copland** (1900-1990) chose Abraham Lincoln, and the enormity of his task became apparent right away: how to sum up, in purely orchestral terms, the man considered by many as the greatest American who ever lived. It was Copland's friend and fellow composer Virgil Thomson who suggested that Copland bring Lincoln himself "into the work," by including some of Lincoln's own words. The quotes used by Copland are, for the most part, from lesser-known speeches by Lincoln. It is not until the work's climax that the famous Gettysburg Address is cited. The work premiered on May 14, 1942 – five months after the U.S. entry into the war.

A Lincoln Portrait is divided into three parts, beginning with a musical depiction of the man himself, which Copland says features, "the mysterious sense of fatality that surrounds Lincoln's personality, and near the end of the first section, something of his gentleness and simplicity of spirit." The second part of the work illustrates the time in which Lincoln lived, with snippets of the folk song *Camptown Races* amid the insouciance of an idealized young America. The final section features quotes from the December 1, 1862 annual Message to Congress, as well as a quote from one of the famous Senatorial debates Lincoln had with Stephen Douglas in 1858. The work concludes with the moving finale of the Gettysburg Address, and a recollection of music from the opening.

Howard Hanson (1896-1981) is the quintessential American composer that practically no one outside the United States has heard of. A mid-20th-century composer contemporary with Copland and Barber, Hanson was director of the Eastman School of Music for 40 years, and was active as a conductor as well as a prolific composer. Like many American composers with a strong nationalist streak, Hanson wanted to write a quintessential American opera, and many thought he had succeeded with ***Merry Mount***, first performed in 1934 at The Met in New York (a concert performance preceded it by nine months). Yet it has not been able to hold the stage, despite its many strong attributes, including Hanson's exceptional orchestral score.

The story of the tragic opera is based on Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *The Maypole of Merry Mount*, a tale of the conflict in the early days of white settlement in America between the Puritans and the more hedonistic Cavalier colonists. Hanson himself extracted the instrumental works used for the suite, which begins with the opera's overture, its modal harmonies depicting the Puritan hymn style. The

Children's Dance accompanies part of the dancing 'round the Maypole of Hawthorne's title, while the Love Duet is ironically titled, depicting as it does the illicit and improper lust that the Puritan pastor has for Marigold Sandys, a woman who appears to be the incarnation of his salacious dreams. The final movement includes a Maypole dance based on the morris dances of English custom, which the Cavaliers enact to the horror of the Puritans.

At around the same time **Aaron Copland** was working on *A Lincoln Portrait* (see above), conductor Eugene Goossens announced a project designed to boost morale following the American entry into the Second World War – a series of 18 brass and percussion fanfares to be commissioned by various composers. "It is my idea to make these fanfares stirring and significant contributions to the war effort," Goossens said. ***Fanfare for the Common Man*** was first performed on March 12, 1943.

Copland's effort is not only the best known, it has become one of the most famous works of American music ever written. Certainly its unusual title is one of its striking features. After trying out a few possible titles for his piece, Copland realized that the running thread was the idea of the ordinary person. "It was the common man, after all, who was doing all the dirty work in the war and the army. He deserved a fanfare." Copland's tempo marking in the score is "very deliberate," and it is richly ceremonial, building to a suitably heroic conclusion.

Of her work ***River Rouge Transfiguration***, premiered in Detroit in 2013 and which the Edmonton Symphony performed earlier this season, **Missy Mazzoli** (b.1980) supplied the following program note:

"…all around me and above me as far as the sky, the heavy, composite, muffled roar of torrents of machines, hard wheels obstinately turning, grinding, groaning, always on the point of breaking down but never breaking down."
— Louis-Ferdinand Céline, from *Journey to the End of the Night*

I first fell in love with Detroit while on tour with my band, Victoire, in 2010. When I returned home to New York I dove into early Detroit techno from the late eighties, Céline's novel *Journey to the End of the Night,* and early 20th century photographs by Charles Sheeler, who documented Detroit's River Rouge Plant in 1927 through a beautiful, angular photo series. In my research I was struck by how often the landscape of Detroit inspired a kind of religious awe, with writers from every decade of the last century comparing the city's factories to cathedrals and altars, and *Vanity Fair* even dubbing Detroit "America's Mecca" in 1928. In Mark Binelli's recent book *Detroit City Is the Place to Be*, he even describes a particular Sheeler photograph, Criss-Crossed Conveyors, as evoking "neither grit nor noise but instead an almost tabernacular grace. The smokestacks in the background look like the pipes of a massive church organ, the titular conveyor belts forming the shape of what is unmistakably a giant cross." This image, of the River Rouge Plant as a massive pipe organ, was the initial inspiration for River Rouge Transfiguration. This is music about the transformation of grit and noise (here represented by the percussion, piano, harp and pizzicato strings) into something massive, resonant and unexpected. The "grit" is again and again folded into string and brass chorales that collide with each other, collapse, and rise over and over again.

River Rouge Transfiguration was commissioned by the Detroit Symphony in honor of Elaine Lebenbom. Thank you to the Detroit Symphony, Leonard Slatkin, Erik Ronmark, Rebecca Zook, Farnoosh Fathi, Katy Tucker, and Mark Binelli.

West Side Story was a watershed in American musical theatre. Written originally for the Broadway stage, it re-cast the story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to the ghetto streets of New York, the warring families replaced by rival gangs. It offered an opportunity for a talented young composer/lyricist to get a major credit as lyricist for the show – Stephen Sondheim. And it showed that a legitimate classical composer could write effectively and aptly for the Broadway stage – **Leonard Bernstein** (1918-1990). The Broadway show, which opened in 1957, was a hit, and won six Tonys. The 1961 film won ten Oscars. Not a single Tony, or Oscar, went to Bernstein or Sondheim.

The same year the movie came out, Bernstein fashioned a work for the concert stage from the music. However, **Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*** is no mere "greatest hits" pastiche. Bernstein wanted to create something from the music that would stand alone as a fully integrated, cohesive piece that would work even outside of the context of the musical. So while there are many tunes one might know from the classic score, there is a cohesion and energy unique to this piece, which ends with the whispered theme from "Somewhere."