

***re-sung***  
***re-do. re-learn. re-imagine.***

**O Boundless, Boundless Evening**  
**Songs of Samuel Barber**  
**25 May 2022**

7pm - St John the Divine, Kennington

lúnó Connolly, Jess Dandy, Dom Sedgwick, Nicky Spence  
Dylan Perez, piano

*Four Songs Op. 13*

- I. A Nun Takes the Veil
- II. The Secrets of the Old
- III. Sure on this Shining Night
- IV. Nocturne

Gerard Manley Hopkins  
William Butler Yeats  
James Agee  
Frederic Prokosh

*Night Wanderers*

*Peace*

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

*Watchers*

William Henry Davies  
trans. Paul Elmer Moore  
Robert Frost  
Dean Cornwell

*Despite and Still, Op. 41*

- I. A Last Song
- II. My Lizard (Wish for a Young Love)
- III. In the Wilderness
- IV. Solitary Hotel
- V. Despite and Still

Robert Graves  
Theodore Roethke  
Robert Graves  
James Joyce  
Robert Graves

*Nuvoletta, Op. 25*

James Joyce  
from *Finnegan's Wake*

*Three Songs, Op. 45*

- I. Now have I fed and eaten up the rose
- II. A Green Lowland of Pianos
- III. O boundless, boundless evening

trans. James Joyce  
trans. Czeslaw Milosz  
trans. Christopher Middleton

*Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op. 24*

James Agee  
from *A Death in the Family*

## PROGRAMME NOTES

Taken from the booklet essay in *The Complete Songs of Samuel Barber (Resonus Classics)*

Some of Barber's most popular songs come from **Four Songs, Op. 13**. Perhaps as a foil to the virtuosity in his opus 10 songs, these are more emotionally direct; the music is less chromatic and dramatic, focused on delivering the texts in a more straightforward way. 'A Nun Takes the Veil', subtitled 'Heaven - Haven', is declamatory but still maintains the integrity of the voice, allowing the singer to bloom and sway with the text. 'The Secrets of the Old' is a song full of wit and wisdom as a group of old women discuss the gossip from years passed. 'Sure on this shining night', perhaps Barber's most beloved and well known song, has a continuous heartbeat through it, as if reassuring the listener that all will be well, all will be healed because of this magical night. 'Nocturne' is a mystical song that encourages a lover to relinquish themselves to the healing embrace of the night.

Included on these discs are the posthumous songs published by G. Schirmer in *65 Songs by Samuel Barber*, including nineteen world premiere recordings. Many of these songs were written before his first published opus; of these, a selection were performed to great acclaim by prominent contralto Louise Homer, the composer's aunt. These include **Watchers, A Slumber Song of the Madonna, and Two Poems of the Wind**. Some of them, like **Who Carries Corn and Crown**, were written as late as 1942. There are certainly songs of merit here; Joyce settings **In the dark pinewood, Strings in the earth and air, and Of that so sweet imprisonment** were taken from 'Chamber Music', the same source as Barber's Opus 10. Barber was already a keen linguist at a young age, setting two songs in French: **La nuit** and **Au clair de la lune**. The **Three Songs of Old England** are charming in their simplicity while songs such as **Ask me to rest** and **Fantasy in Purple** are almost orchestral in scope. **Love's Caution** and **Night Wanderers** are expertly set tone poems and **Stopping by Woods on a Snow Evening** is simple and effective. A truly unique voice in the American musical landscape, we can already hear that young Samuel was carving his own compositional tone world - one that was intrinsically his and let him become his fully realised artistic self.

Perhaps the most harmonically adventurous set of songs, **Despite and Still, op. 41**, was written after a prolonged period of compositional and emotional depression which stemmed from his personal life and the perceived failing of his opera *Antony and Cleopatra*. You can hear Barber's tortured soul in these songs and they were perhaps written to help him get through his darker moments. The poetry deals with couples: 'A Last Song' is an argument and 'My Lizard' is a wish for young love never to grow old. 'In the Wilderness' is about Christ and a follower cast exiled, wandering and conversing with the lesser of society. 'Solitary Hotel' is enigmatic; we are dropped into hotel witnessing an exchange we don't understand. The anger in 'Despite and Still' is palpable in the hammered piano part, this couple is staying together regardless of their differences.

In **Nuvoletta, op. 25**, Barber returns to James Joyce, this time excerpting from *Finnegans Wake*. While the text is extremely dense, the excerpt that Barber chooses is a short scena that can be more easily understood, even if it is out of context. A little girl, Nuvoletta, is trying to catch the attention of others, only to fail and, in dramatic fashion, feigns suicide by jumping from a bannister. Barber's ingenious setting marries Nuvoletta's innocence with a lilting 3/8, the piano lightly commenting on the Joycean invented words that populate the text: sisteen shimmers, bannistar, sfumastelliacinous. Charming compositional techniques are found throughout, but hidden from the immediate ear of the listener; at mention of "Tristis Tristor Tristissimus", a hint of Wagner's Tristan shines through, while later when Nuvoletta's tears fall in numbers, Barber mirrors them with intervallic leaps in the voice and rhythmic gestures in the piano. A melismatic weep brings the voice to the stratosphere before returning to the lilt found at the beginning, before Nuvoletta jumps and the song ends in a haze.

**Knoxville: Summer of 1915, op. 24** is one of Barber's most cherished compositions. Taken from *A Death in the Family* by James Agee, the poignant narration is from the view of a child who seemingly grows up as the song develops. Heard here as a premiere recording of the composer's piano setting, we feel just as vividly the heat that is evoked in the larger symphonic work, which is more well known. The listener is invited into memories of a summer evening from the sparse introduction into a lilting, cradling rhythmic figure. The bustle of a city is heard with car horns before turning mystical into the night's 'blue dew'. Particularly expressive, full of both naiveté and wisdom, is the section about the narrators family lying out on the grass, enjoying each other's company. This "lyric rhapsody", as Barber called it, ends with a cry out to God to protect those family members and to guide the narrator through the rest of his life, before the lilting figure finally comes to a close.