

MIT CHAMBER CHORUS
Dr. William Cutter, director
Karen Harvey, assistant conductor

Saturday, May 8, 2004, 8:00 pm
Kresge Auditorium, MIT

“Mary Hynes”
from *Reincarnations*, Op. 16, No. 1
“To be sung on the water”
Op. 42, No. 2

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

In the Beginning

Aliana de la Guardia, *mezzo-soprano*

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

—Intermission—

The Nothing That Is
(World Premiere)

Libby Larsen (b. 1950)

Part One: Logos %
Part Two: To Zero
Part Three: Pure Zero
Part Four *Ad astra, per aspero*

Thomas Jones, *baritone*
David Karger, Ahmed Ismail, and Monani Haddad, *narrators*

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

"*Mary Hynes*," from *Reincarnations*, Op. 16, No. 1

To be sung on the water, Op. 42, No. 2

Samuel Barber's music represents the confluence of twentieth-century tonal harmonies and nineteenth-century structures. Both a pianist and a baritone of some repute, Barber is principally known as a composer of songs and of music for piano. Listening to his songs, piano compositions, and orchestral works, one detects a distinct French influence on his work. Certainly the refinement that is a hallmark of the great French composers such as Fauré, Ravel, and Poulenc is present throughout his work, but so is the French sensitivity to word-setting. His vocal lines always respond to the contours and meaning of the text, even if explicit word-painting is absent.

Examining Barber's smaller output as a choral composer, the noticeable influences are not French Impressionism so much as British Romanticism and in particular the *a cappella* choral output of Elgar, Stanford, and Parry. "Mary Hynes" is a vigorous, nearly folk-like setting, and the first of three settings of James Stephens poems collectively entitled *Reincarnations*. Although Mary would at first seem to be a prize—she is "above the women of the race of Eve" and the "dart of love," amongst other things—she is also cryptic, a "rune." The nimble choral writing alternately depicts both sides of her nature until the muted ending, as the sound slowly vanishes away, "airily."

In sharp contrast to "Mary Hynes," the part-song "To be sung on the water" is a restrained, lyrical setting of a Louise Bogan poem. At one point, Barber intended to insert this song into *Antony and Cleopatra*, his final opera, but ultimately decided against it; however, he had enough affection for the piece that he asked that it be performed at his funeral. Heard in every bar of the piece, a slow, lapping motive comprising two sixteenth notes followed by a quarter note suggests the paddling of oars. Against this rhythm appears a long, lyrical outpouring, first given to the sopranos and altos and then to the tenors and basses. Instead of building to a climax, we are given a slow, quiet coda which "like an echo" recedes into the eternal night.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

In the Beginning (1947)

The characteristic sound of Aaron Copland—open sonorities, rhythmic incisiveness, and melodic angularity—is facilely realized by an orchestra, as can be seen in works like *Fanfare for the Common Man*, *Appalachian Spring*, and *Rodeo*. Working with smaller ensembles, with their more restricted tonal palettes, proved a much greater challenge for the composer. In fact, few composers of Copland's stature have such similarly slender portfolios of works for voices: all told, he wrote less than a dozen choral works, including several choruses from the opera *The Tender Land*, and a handful of songs, many of which remain unpublished. Of the choral works, only *In the Beginning* has received much serious attention.

The composition of *In the Beginning* occurred under rather unusual circumstances. Commissioned for the 1947 Harvard Symposium on Music Criticism, the organizers of the conference suggested that Copland set a Hebrew text for his new work. Daunted by working

both in a relatively new medium (chorus) and an almost entirely unfamiliar language, Copland instead chose to set the opening verses of Genesis in its familiar English translation. One of the longest continuous *a cappella* pieces ever written, it had its premiere on May 2, 1947 under the baton of Robert Shaw, sharing the occasion with the premiere of Hindemith's *Apparebit repentina dies*.

The format of this sprawling work is relatively straightforward: for most of the work, the mezzo-soprano soloist and the chorus alternate roles. The mezzo-soprano provides us with God's pronouncements (with two telling exceptions); the chorus then paints vivid portraits of the execution of those pronouncements. Underneath this simple description, though, lies a wealth of felicitous details—abrupt harmony changes, repetitions of similar texts to ever-varying rhythmic figures, and brilliant passages where the rich eight-part choral texture is reduced to unison or two-part singing.

Copland marks the opening, for the mezzo-soprano alone, with the marking “in a gentle, narrative manner, like reading a familiar and oft-told story.” From these famous first words, the chorus slowly emerges, in descending figures describing the creation of day and night. [Here, “light” and “day” are distinguished from “darkness” and “night” through the use of richer harmonies for the latter; night has always been more interesting musically than daytime!] Like each of the six main segments of the work, this first section concludes with the chant “And the evening and the morning were the first day.” The next section, describing the “dividing of the waters,” does so by moving towards C major: we start at C flat, then move quickly through D flat and B flat before arriving at C. Copland does not stop there, however, and builds up to a climax in A major on the word “Heaven.”

The free-wheeling change in tonal areas continues into the third “day,” the creation of the Earth. The most notable characteristic of this section is the contrary motion of the upper and lower voices, although each phrase starts with the same chord, already suggesting the cycle of seasons in which the “herb yielding seed” and “tree yielding fruit” will blossom and prosper. The conclusion of the third day is a serene D major.

Above that chord, the mezzo-soprano intones “almost breathlessly” God's next pronouncement: “Let there be lights.” While each of her phrases moves downward, each starts higher than the last, until a sustained high F sharp leads to an outburst in the chorus, representing the creation of the sun and the moon, “and the stars also.” At the conclusion of the fourth day, we expect the return of the mezzo-soprano, but instead the chorus continues, bringing forth “great whales.” The whales, heard in the slow, gently moving bass line, swim in the waters below, while the upper voices in canon tell of the creation of fowl.

The creation continues into the sixth day with the creation of the beasts walking upon the earth. Then, in octave unison, the choir declaims “Let us make man,” leading to, for the first and only time in this piece, a section which captures the quintessential Copland sound—a lively tune with simple open harmonies and strong rhythmic drive. [Curiously, it is not active creation, but the decision to create, that is entrusted to the chorus.] As man is given “dominion over the earth,” the choir sings in open octaves, seconds, and thirds until a long pedal on an open fifth heralds a slow, moving solo for the mezzo-soprano, completing the work of creation at the end of the sixth day.

At this point, the music slowly settles and seemingly “rests” as the seventh day begins. However, the harmonies are somewhat unsettled: we feel that something is still missing. At the start of the coda, the music slowly builds as the Earth comes to life. Yet even still, the

picture is incomplete—there is no one to tend to the ground! In the memorable final bars, as Copland inexorably builds from *forte* to double, then triple, and finally quadruple *forte*, man becomes, at the ecstatic and triumphant cadence, “a living soul.”

—Ahmed E. Ismail

Libby Larsen (b. 1950)
***The Nothing That Is* (2004)**

In our technological age, I've begun to wonder if our faith in number itself is inextricably entwined with our spiritual faith? We do, in fact, believe in infinity. We also believe in zero. Without zero, all the technology which services and drives our contemporary lives—computers, engines, and the like—is not possible. Travel in space is not possible were it not for our faith in zero and all that zero makes possible.

The Nothing That Is, for baritone solo, 2 narrators, chorus and chamber ensemble, is a contemplation of faith in supreme being through faith in numbers, in particular the mystical number zero. Telling the story of the Apollo 13 flight I wrought a libretto made up of excerpts from the Apollo 13 flight transcript and Psalms 90, 13, and 131 combined with excerpts from writings of Ptolemy, John Donne, Charles Pierce and John F. Kennedy. Each of the vocal groups assumes a role: the baritone soloist as guide and provocateur; the narrators as astronauts and ground crew; the chorus as Greek Chorus, creating the quality of infinity in space, giving the countdown for the launch and singing settings of the Psalms.

The composition is in four-part story form. Part I, Logos, reveals zero in its ancient, non-Western role. The text contemplates the first line of the Bible, "In the Beginning there was..." interpolating into the sentence the original Greek word "logos" which means "word" but also means "ratio". The ratio of 00/00 is impossible, yet 0 exists ad infinitum. Part II, To Zero, places us at the launch site of Apollo 13, during the countdown to 00:00. Here, 0 is both positive and negative, both anticipatory and terminating.

Part III, Pure Zero, frames the astronauts' dilemma as their technology fails them and they rely on faith in the position of the stars for survival. Finally, in Part IV, Ad Astra Per Aspero, a resolution is found in the message of Psalm 13—"But I have trusted in Thy grace."

—Libby Larsen