

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Although his parents did not encourage his musical pursuits, Samuel Barber (1910-1981) predicted his involvement with music from a very early age. While still a boy, he wrote his mother a letter explaining his calling, "I was meant to be a composer, and will be, I'm sure." Enrolled from its founding in 1924, Barber was a charter student of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. Recognition for his compositions came while still a student at Curtis. Trained also as a baritone, Barber worked as a singer immediately after graduation. His facility as a singer and understanding of the voice likely contributed to Barber's success in vocal composition. Acclaimed for his lyricism and commitment to the melodic line, Barber maintained ties with conventional tonalities abandoned by many of his mid-twentieth century contemporaries. Inspired by the texts he chose to set, Barber frequently employed text painting and allowed a metric freedom to be dictated by the text.

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, James Agee (1909-1955) considered the summer of 1915 the last chapter of his childhood innocence and optimism. After his father was killed in an automobile accident in May 1916, his life changed dramatically. Feeling that he needed appropriate male role models, his mother, a devout woman, relocated the family and enrolled him in Saint Andrew's boarding school near Sewanee, TN. Feeling isolated and alone, he eventually accepted the guidance of one of his teachers, Father Flye. Under his counsel, Agee applied and was accepted into the prestigious Exeter Academy and eventually into Harvard. Throughout his lifetime, James Agee achieved success as a poet and novelist, as a journalist and film critic, and as a scriptwriter and social activist. His most well known work, the autobiographical novel *A Death in the Family*, was published posthumously in 1957.

As an adult, Agee's remembrances of childhood poured out onto paper. His depiction of summer in Knoxville—of security and stability, of peacefulness and playfulness—captured the wonder and potential of a world unmarred by tragedy. *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* initially appeared in 1938 as a short literary piece. Commissioned by soprano Eleanor Steber and premiered in 1948, Barber's setting of this text portrays a nostalgic scene from Agee's childhood days in Tennessee. In Barber's treatment of *Knoxville* for orchestra and soprano, the serene and effortless introduction by the woodwinds depicts a pastoral setting in which the singer abides—a summer evening on the front porch of his home with his family. The almost-conversational vocal line begins amid the carefree pizzicato (plucking) of the strings and the lazy, rocking arpeggiation of the flute. Becoming more immersed in the scene, Barber accentuates the specificity of Agee's remembrances through text painting (the soprano suspended as she sings "hovering over them").

The second section of the piece begins mischievously in the orchestra. Marked *allegro agitato* (fast and agitated), the woodwinds initiate excited chatter surrounding the passing of an electric streetcar. The strings and finally the brass spread word of its arrival. More text painting is obvious in the vocal line as it describes the "moaning" of the iron. Here and elsewhere, Barber employs lowered scale degrees reminiscent of the blues. Not only does this identify the scene as uniquely American, but it also implies a longing for better days typical of the blues idiom.

Soon, the excitement is gone as the streetcar passes, restoring the peaceful evening—"one blue dew"—to its onlookers. We hear a return of the initial lilting triple meter, while the singer nestles into the scene, as if clinging to it, "We all lie there . . . I too am lying there." While recalling each of the family members present, Barber underscores Agee's fond memory of his father by emphasizing each reference to him, in comparison to the rest of the family members.

Reflecting back upon his world and the things he valued, Agee regretted that things would not remain as they were in this scene. His longing is depicted in a child-like prayer, "May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away." Barber captures this earnestness through elongation of rhythms and a steady and dramatic crescendo. In the end, tucked away safely in his bed, he is left to ponder his identity, a search that would continue for the rest of his life.

-Michele L. Henry*