Three Places in New England

(1911-14?, rev. 1929, 1935)

by Charles Ives

(Danbury, Connecticut, 1874 – New York, 1954)

I. The "St. Gaudens" in Boston Common
(Col. Shaw and his Colored Regiment)
II. Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut
III. The Housatonic at Stockbridge

Ives originally called the present work his *First Orchestral Set* (now known by what was originally a subtitle). In it, he memorialized places he cherished, places filled with historical memories from a world that was rapidly changing before his eyes as the growth and modernization of American cities were fundamentally transforming the landscape. The music merges the places with the artist contemplating them. One might say that the recognizable traditional tunes symbolize concrete reality, while the innovative uses of those tunes, their distortions, and other manipulations make us see that reality through the eyes of the composer.

Like many of Ives's works, *Three Places* has a complicated composition history. In this case, we may discern four distinct stages in the work's genesis. Originally conceived for a large orchestra over a number of years before World War I, the composition never reached performance (or even, it seems, a definitive form) at the time. After the war, Ives started working on a more practical version for a smaller orchestra; this second version was first performed under the direction of Nicolas Slonimsky (a Russian-born conductor, later achieving fame as a musicologist) at New York's Town Hall on January 10, 1931. After further revisions, this version (No. 3) was published in 1935. Many years later, conductor and Ives specialist James Sinclair created a critical edition recreating the original scoring for large orchestra; this version, which is now the standard form of the work, received its premiere in 1974 by the Yale Symphony (the orchestra of Ives's alma mater) under the direction of John Mauceri.

Continued...

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In Boston Common, the beautiful gardens located in the center of the city, there is a monumental bas-relief by Irish-born sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens, memorializing Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the white commander of the all-Black 54th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, which fought valiantly in the Civil War. Many of the men, including Col. Shaw himself, were killed in the Battle of Fort Wagner.

Ives composed a moving elegy in memory of the slain heroes, with snatches of three tunes (Stephen Foster's "Old Black Joe," Henry Work's "Marching through Georgia," and "The Battle-Cry of Freedom," by George Root) woven into a delicate orchestral tapestry filled with complex polyrhythms. At one point, the soldiers start marching. The tempo becomes faster, but Ives instructs the orchestra to "hold back a little, almost imperceptibly," because, as he wrote, "often when a mass of men march up hill, there is an unconscious slowing up. The Drum seems to follow the feet, rather than the feet the drum." After a powerful C-major climax, the music sinks back to its initial meditative state.

Ives wrote the following poem about the St. Gaudens, which he included in the score:

> Moving—Marching—Faces of Souls!
> Marked with generations of pain,
> Part-freers of a Destiny,
> Slowly, restlessly—swaying us on with you
> Towards other Freedom!
> The man on horseback, carved from
> A native quarry of the world Liberty
> And from what your country was made.

Continued...

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I. The "St. Gaudens" in Boston Common (Col. Shaw and his Colored Regiment)

Continued...

Your images of a Divine Law
Carved in the shadow of a saddened heart--
Never light abandoned--
Of an age and of a nation.
Above and beyond that compelling mass
Rises the drum-beat of the common-heart
In the silence of a strange and
Sounding afterglow
Moving—Marching—Faces of Souls!

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II. Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut

Ives prefaced the score with the following remarks:

> Near Redding Center, Connecticut, is a small park preserved as a Revolutionary Memorial; for here General Israel Putnam's soldiers had their winter quarters in 1778-1779. Long rows of stone campfire—places remain to stir a child's imagination. The hardships which the soldiers endured and the agitation of a few hot-heads to break camp and march to the Hartford Assembly for relief are a part of Redding history.
>
> Once upon a "4th of July," some time ago, so the story goes, a child went there on a picnic, held under the auspices of the First Church and the Village Cornet Band. Wandering away from the rest of the children past the campground into the woods, he hopes to catch a glimpse of some of the old soldiers. As he rests on the hillside of laurel and hickories, the tunes of the band and the songs of the children grow fainter and fainter; when—"mirabile dictu"—over the trees on the crest of the hill he sees a tall woman standing. She reminds him of a picture he has of the Goddess of Liberty, but the face is sorrowful. She is pleading with the soldiers not to forget their "cause" and the great sacrifices they have made for it. But they march out of camp with fife and drum to a popular tune of the day. Suddenly, a new national note is heard. Putnam is coming over the hills from the center, and the soldiers turn back and cheer. The little boy awakes, he hears the children's songs and runs down past the monument to "listen to the band" and join in the games and dances.

Continued...

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Continued...

> The repertoire of national airs at that time was meagre. Most of them were of English origin. It is a curious fact that a tune very popular with the American soldiers was "The British Grenadiers." A captain in one of Putnam's regiments put it to words, which were sung for the first time in 1779 at a patriotic meeting in the Congregational Church in Redding Center; the text is both ardent and interesting.

In this lively march-scherzo, Ives "recycled" and completely rewrote two early works for orchestra: the *Country Band March* and the *Overture & March 1776*, both written in 1903. The two bands marching in opposite directions actually play in different tempos and different meters at the same time; fragments of several traditional tunes ("The Arkansas Traveler," "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Ground," "Yankee Doodle," "The Liberty Bell," "Semper Fidelis," and more) are added to the mix.

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III. The Housatonic at Stockbridge

After two movements celebrating glorious military history, the last movement retreats to the private sphere with what begins as a peaceful nature painting. The inspiration this time was entirely personal, as it has to do with the memory of the honeymoon of Charles and Harmony Ives in June 1908. The newlyweds took a hiking trip to the Berkshires, where they admired the idyllic landscape of the Housatonic River. As he was walking by the river with his bride, Ives heard the strains of the hymn "Dorrnance" wafting over from a nearby church, and he built the entire movement on fragments of this hymn tune, combined with an evocation of the water and the trees surrounding it in the morning mist.

The poet Robert Underwood Johnson (1853-1937) had been there before him and wrote a long poem with the title *The Housatonic at Stockbridge*, from which Ives took the following excerpts as an introduction to his music:

> Contented river! in thy dreamy realm—
> The cloudy willow and the plumy elm...
>
> Thou hast grown human, laboring with men
> At wheel and spindle; sorrow thou dost ken;...
>
> Thou beautiful! From every dreamy hill
> What eye but wanders with thee at thy will,
> Imagining thy silver course unseen
> Convoyed by two attendant streams of green...

Continued...

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III. The Housatonic at Stockbridge

Continued...

> Contented river! and yet over-shy
> To mask thy beauty from the eager eye;
> Hast thou a thought to hide from field and town?
> In some deep current of the sunlit brown
> Art thou disquieted—still uncontent
> With praise from thy Homeric bard, who lent
> The world, the placidness thou gavest him?
> Thee Bryant loved when his life was at its brim;...
>
> Ah! there's a restive ripple, and the swift
> Red leaves—September's firstlings—faster drift;
>
> Wouldst thou away!.....
> I also of much resting have a fear;
> Let me thy companions be
> By fall and shallow to the adventurous sea!
>
> (Interestingly, Johnson had also written a poem celebrating St. Gaudens.)

Ives's music begins with a complex polymetric texture in the strings, depicting the haze over the Housatonic; it then gradually rises in volume until the grandiose conclusion in which the river quite palpably reaches the "adventurous sea."

Violin Concerto, Op.14
(1939)
by Samuel Barber
(West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1910 – New York, 1981)

I. Allegro
II. Andante
III. Presto in moto perpetuo

Barber was 29 years old when he completed his violin concerto, a year after Toscanini's performances of the *First Essay* and *Adagio for Strings* catapulted him to fame. It was his first major commission, coming from Samuel Fels, soap manufacturer and a trustee at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, Barber's alma mater. (Barber later referred to the work in private correspondence as his "concerto del sapone," or "soap concerto.") Fels intended the concerto for his adopted son, Iso Briselli, a former child prodigy and a student of the celebrated Carl Flesch. Fels offered Barber $1000, half of which was paid in advance and the other half upon completion of the concerto. But things didn't quite work out between the composer and violinist. Briselli raised objections to the last movement of the concerto and asked Barber to make some major changes, which the composer refused to do. As a result, Briselli never played the work that was written for him.

In order to defend against claims that the concerto was unplayable, a young student at Curtis, Herbert Baumel, was asked to help. Based on an interview with Baumel made in 1984, in her standard biography of Barber, Barbara Heyman gives the following account of what happened:

> One afternoon during the autumn of 1939, while Baumel was sitting in the commons room of the Curtis Institute of Music, [pianist] Ralph Berkowitz walked into the room and handed him a pencil manuscript of a violin part without telling him the name of the composer. He was told only that he had two hours in which to learn the music, that the "piece should be played very fast," and to return "dressed up" and ready to play before a few people. The

Continued...

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Continued...

> private performance took place in the studio of Josef Hofmann, where the tension and solemnity of the occasion, as recalled by Baumel, suggested that much was at stake for Barber besides the financial aspects of the commission....Ralph Berkowitz accompanied Baumel, who produced dazzling evidence that the concerto was indeed playable at any tempo. There were "bravos" and the ritualistic tea and cookies. The verdict was that Barber was to be paid the full commission and Briselli had to relinquish his right to the first performance of the work. The trial was based on a performance of the incomplete third movement through rehearsal no. 6, ending abruptly at measure 94.

If the finale was given incomplete during Baumel's demonstration, then no one could get an idea of the concerto's difficulties until the official premiere, which took place on February 7, 1941, with soloist Albert Spalding and the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy. In fact, part of the challenge lies precisely in keeping the momentum going for the entire length of the movement. In fact, technical virtuosity is so strongly in evidence throughout the finale that some critics have seen little else in it. It has indeed been repeated again and again that the last movement is the weakest of the three. On closer look, however, the Presto turns out to be the most harmonically adventurous of the concerto's movements.

Continued...

Violin Concerto, Op.14

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I. Allegro
II. Andante
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Continued...

Without so much as a single measure of introduction, the solo violin begins the first movement with a tender melody, played over a gentle orchestral accompaniment. The atmosphere is idyllic, like a sunny summer afternoon in a beautiful garden. The first melody has repeatedly been called "Mozartian" in its purity and its perfect equilibrium, but even Mozart didn't eschew conflict and contrast as much as Barber did. Then, the clarinet introduces a second melody (somewhat faster-moving than the first but equally lyrical). A playful and animated, but brief violin passage completes the collection of themes: the three form a happy family whose bliss nothing and no one can perturb. Interestingly, the characteristic clarinet theme is taken over by the soloist only at the very end; this effect was saved for the movement's ethereal coda.

The idyll continues in the second-movement Andante. The solo oboe presents a long, and longing, melody, repeated by the cellos. The solo violin enters with more agitated material, leading to a cadenza, after which the violin takes over the opening melody. A brief *fortissimo* section flares up before the movement ends on a calm and peaceful chord.

The first two movements were written in the summer of 1939, in Sils Maria in the beautiful Engadin Valley of Switzerland. Barber expected to finish the third movement in Europe as well, but, as Heyman writes, "his plans were interrupted....when at the end of August all Americans were warned to leave Europe because of the impending invasion of Poland by the Nazis."

Continued...

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I. Allegro
II. Andante
III. Presto in moto perpetuo

Continued...

Barber sailed home on September 2, the day after the invasion, and finished the concerto in the Poconos. It would certainly be wrong to infer any direct links between these circumstances and the concerto's third movement; in any event, Barber had from the outset planned a finale with "ample opportunity to display the artist's technical powers." But the finale movement definitely disrupts the idyll of the first two movements. Despite the steady motion in triplets that represents no small part of the violinist's challenge, there are more surprises here than ever before. For one thing, after two largely diatonic movements (concentrating on the seven notes of the major or minor scale), the language in the third is chromatic (making use of all twelve pitches in the tonal system). For another, some unexpected changes in the meter throw off the seemingly simple patterns established at the beginning. Furthermore, Barber made the orchestration spicier by adding the snare drum, by ingeniously combining *pizzicato* (plucked) and arco (bow) string techniques, and by a more pointillistic use of the woodwind instruments. There is a powerful climax near the end, after which Barber cranks up the tempo even more, replacing triplets with sixteenth notes for the frantic last seventeen measures of the concerto.

blue cathedral
(2000)
by Jennifer Higdon
(b. Brooklyn, New York, 1962)

Jennifer Higdon, who received the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in music for her Violin Concerto, is one of the most-performed American symphonic composers today. A professor at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, she is an influential figure whose works place traditional melody and tonality in the service of a contemporary sensibility, striking a deep chord with listeners.

blue cathedral, commissioned for the 75th anniversary of the Curtis Institute, commemorates the composer's younger brother, Andrew Blue, who died at the age of 33. Since Andrew was a clarinet player and Jennifer a flutist (they used to play in the same high school band), these two instruments play extensive solos throughout, and their interactions form the foundation of what one commentator perceived as "musical stories" in the work. The image of the cathedral, invoked in the title, is reinforced by the frequent use of the chimes, one of several means Higdon uses to transcend the tragic character one would associate with a lament. As the composer explained in a program note:

> When I began *blue cathedral*, it was the one-year anniversary of my (younger) brother's death, so I was pondering a lot of things about the journey we make after death…I was imagining a traveler on a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky (therefore making it a blue color)…I wanted the music to sound like it was progressing into this constantly opening space, feeling more and more celebratory…As the journey progresses, the individual would float higher and higher above the floor, soaring towards an expanding ceiling where the heart would feel free and joyful.

An American in Paris
(1928)
by George Gershwin
(Brooklyn, 1898 - Hollywood, 1937)

George Gershwin achieved early success as one of the most brilliant songwriters on Broadway. He had more ambitious dreams, however: he aspired to be recognized as a serious classical composer. He felt that American classical music had to incorporate elements of jazz to find a distinctive national voice. *Rhapsody in Blue* was Gershwin's first step in that direction, followed by the *Concerto in F*, *An American in Paris*, and, finally, the opera *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin, a fabulous pianist and improviser, knew that his technical equipment as a classical composer was incomplete, and tried hard to fill in the gaps in his knowledge by applying himself to the study of music theory and orchestration.

The original manuscript of *An American in Paris* bears the following inscription by Gershwin: "An American in Paris, a tone poem for orchestra, composed and orchestrated by George Gershwin. Begun early in 1928, finished November 18, 1928." Gershwin went out of his way to point out that he had done the orchestration himself, because much as his melodic gifts and his pianistic virtuosity were acclaimed, he was dogged by constant criticism of what were perceived as shortcomings in his compositional craftsmanship.

Gershwin provided the following explanation of this piece in an interview for *Musical America* at the time of the premiere, given by Walter Damrosch and the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall on December 13, 1928:

> This new piece, really a symphonic ballet, is written very freely and is the most modern music I've yet attempted. The opening part will be developed in typical French style, in the manner of Debussy and The Six, though the themes are original. My purpose here is to portray the impression of an American visitor in Paris, as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere.

Continued...

An American in Paris

(1928)

by George Gershwin

(Brooklyn, 1898 - Hollywood, 1937)

Continued...

As in my other orchestral compositions, I've not endeavored to represent any definite scenes in this music. The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him.

The opening gay section is followed by a rich “blues” with a strong rhythmic undercurrent. Our American friend, perhaps after strolling into a café and having a couple of drinks, has suddenly succumbed to a spasm of homesickness. The harmony here is both more intense and [more] simple than in the preceding pages. This “blues” rises to a climax, followed by a coda in which the spirit of the music returns to the vivacity and bubbling exuberance of the opening part with its impressions of Paris. Apparently, the homesick American, having left the café and reached the open air, has disowned his spell of the blues and once again is an alert spectator of Parisian life. At the conclusion, the street noises and French atmosphere are triumphant!

Program *Notes by Peter Laki*