

N. CAMERON BRITT (born 1974)

INLEDNING

Composed: 2004

Premiered: Baltimore, 2004

A Fulbright Scholar in composition and percussion in Sweden, N. Cameron Britt composed *Inledning* (Swedish for “Introduction”) as his bid for the ultimate in musical compression. Form enthusiasts (they do exist!) will recognize that this piece is in a clearly-defined tertiary (A-B-A) form; the more discerning will discover that each individual sub-section is *itself* in A-B-A form, giving us an impressive formula of ABACDCABA for the overall structure of the work. Race fans, however, will be more impressed by the fact that this complex edifice is crammed into *one minute* of music. Listen fast!

CHRISTOPHER WEISS (born 1980)

VOICE OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

Composed: 2007

Premiered: Jacksonville, Florida, 2007

PROGRAM NOTE BY THE COMPOSER

My family’s history of military service has been part of my memories since early childhood. I remember hearing my maternal grandfather’s stories about his service in the Navy and the Air Force as well as the attack on Pearl Harbor, at which he was present. I remember my father’s stories about his service in the Navy as a submariner during the Vietnam War and my uncle’s stories of service in the Coast Guard around the same time. Now I hear stories from my younger sister, who followed my father by serving in the Navy. Stories, then – human stories with all their inherent drama – inspired this new composition.

“Voice of the Unknown Soldier” was composed and orchestrated between September 28, 2007 and November 13, 2007. As with any musical work incorporating a strong dramatic or narrative impulse, I began far in advance with research. I knew that the greatest challenge in this piece would be to honor the personal journeys our servicemen and women undertake without succumbing to cliché or naïve sentimentality. I revisited all the standard war movies, both old and new, but I wanted to limit my reading to the current war in Iraq.

One book leads to another, and one day I found myself on a train from Philadelphia to New York City with Nathaniel Fick's combat memoir *One Bullet Away*, based on Fick's service as a Marine Corp Officer in Iraq and Afghanistan. As I made my way through the pages, I was struck by two things: first, in combat there are remarkable human stories to be shared; second, I can comprehend a remarkably small part of what it is like to have lived those stories.

That same night I contacted Fick about the piece I was composing. Since that initial contact, Nathaniel Fick has been an extremely influential collaborator, discussing with me my dramatic goals in music as they relate to his actual experiences on the frontline. His perspective, his advice has strengthened the overall dramatic narrative of this piece in a way that my reading alone, no matter how extensive, could not.

It is my hope that "Voice of the Unknown Soldier" will reflect the many stories of soldiers, both past and present. In the end, it is the human stories that reveal the day-to-day experience of living in a state of war.

What would the world be like if these stories were left untold, inchoate, unremembered?

"VOICE OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER": A MARINE'S FIRST LISTEN
BY NATHANIEL FICK

This symphony hall is a long way from the battlefield only until the lights go down and the first note sounds. From Spartan pipers on the plains of Thermopylae to Metallica on iPods in Baghdad, from Shostakovich in besieged Leningrad to Barber's "Adagio for Strings" in Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, music is part of how we fight wars, and how we remember them.

Christopher Weiss' tone poem "Voice of the Unknown Soldier" rings true to my experience of combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. It isn't a political statement—soldiers and Marines have more immediate concerns than politics. Nor is it artistically contrived—given music's historical and visceral ties to warfare, Weiss avoids the pitfalls of "dancing about architecture."

His work is cast in three sections. The three-note rhythmic motif of the first evokes, for me, the staccato chatter of a rifle firing bursts. As the counterpoint builds, one player/one drum becomes two players/two drums, become three players/twelve drums, become four players/twenty drums. In this way, individual soldiers are melded into teams. Peacetime training's Sousa march fades to a dream... and we wake with a crash to combat's reality: revolving nightmares, sleeping and waking, sleeping and waking.

Fortunately, humans are nothing if not adaptable. The shots and explosions represented in the piece's central section quickly become white noise. I remember my exhausted platoon asleep on the ground one night near a highway crossroads in central Iraq. Enemy artillery fire exploded into a field next to us, shaking the earth and sending towers of purple and

yellow fire into the dark sky. A few men stuck their heads up, to see what was happening, before drifting off to sleep again. The rest never stirred.

Hours are seconds, and seconds are lifetimes. Close combat is hyperkinetic, without transitions: eat half a granola bar, kill an enemy fighter, then finish the other half. It's also capricious. After one particularly vicious fight, I found a Marine sitting in the dirt, holding an AK-47 bullet in his palm. It had passed through a friend of ours before ricocheting to a halt. When I asked the sergeant what he was thinking, he replied, "The difference between life and death out here is seconds and millimeters—it's the sacred geometry of chance."

Sacred is the right word. Solemn, dignified, gentle, hymn-like—we hear it at the end of the second section. Interludes of humanity—a child chasing a ball, a bird bathing in a roadside puddle—are more beautiful for the violence surrounding them.

Then, with a boom, it's over. For some, the boom is an unlucky shot or a lethal bomb blast. For others, it's the wheels touching down on a hometown runway. Either way, after the boom, a void.

Nathaniel Fick graduated from Dartmouth with High Honors in Classics before serving as a Marine Corps infantry officer in Afghanistan and Iraq. He is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *One Bullet Away*, named one of the "Best Books of 2005" by The Washington Post.

AARON COPLAND (1900–1990)

***APPALACHIAN SPRING* – Suite**

Composed: 1944

Premiered: Washington, DC, 1944

To say the least of it, Aaron Copland was full of surprises. John Wayne once asked to be introduced to the man who had written such fine, strong, all-American music—music that enshrined the spirit of the Old West—and was startled to find himself shaking the hand of an openly gay Jewish Communist from Brooklyn who spent many years very near the top of the Blacklist. Copland thought of himself as a gritty, serious composer in the Schoenbergian mode (and there is plenty of music by Copland to prove it), but he was always best known, and always will be, as the composer of a number of works in a populist, open-hearted style that for many—John Wayne included—is simply *the* style of modern American music. *Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid*—two ballets set in the Wild West—allowed Copland to set Hollywood's Western musical agenda forever more, but, ironically, his politics prevented him from ever scoring a major movie. His own

association with the West, incidentally, began and ended with his childhood nurse having been the niece of Pat Garrett, executioner of Billy the Kid.

Copland had similarly little linking him personally with the rural expanses of the Eastern states; this partly explains the weird conundrum of the title of *Appalachian Spring*, which was known throughout its gestation simply as *Ballet for Martha*. “Martha” was the choreographer Martha Graham, who commissioned the music. She gave Copland a vague outline of a story—little more than the courtship of a rural couple, taking place nowhere in particular. It was Martha Graham herself who suggested calling the piece *Appalachian Spring*, after a line in her favorite poem, *The Dance* by Hart Crane:

O Appalachian Spring! I gained the ledge;
Steep, inaccessible smile that eastward bends
And northward reaches in that violet wedge
Of Adirondacks! wisped of azure wands ...

The title had no sooner been decided on than Miss Graham wrote a final scenario for the ballet that took place entirely in *Pennsylvania*. Copland became fond of gleefully pointing this out when told by admirers that his music perfectly expressed the soul of either the Poconos or the Adirondacks, when neither had been anywhere near his thoughts as he composed the music in darkest Brooklyn. It seemed almost churlish to mention further that the “spring” of the Crane poem is a water source, not a season. That Copland composed much of the music under the patronage of the Ex-Lax Corporation made it all even funnier. The similarity of the story to the “dream ballet” of *Oklahoma*, incidentally, is no coincidence at all; both Copland and Graham were close friends and admirers of Richard Rodgers and Agnes de Mille, composer and choreographer of *Oklahoma*.

The original ballet music was scored for thirteen instruments; the premiere took place in the Library of Congress, which excluded the possibility of anything more grandiose. However, the success of the music was so instantaneous and widespread (Pulitzer Prize for Music, 1945) that a suite for full orchestra soon followed, helped along by a staggering fee from Serge Koussevitzky; it is this version that is best known. Although nominally a “suite from the ballet,” only a couple of minutes of material are missing from the original score.

The suite opens with the definitive American rural musical scene, all open fifths and reaching major sevenths; through Copland’s students (notably Jerome Moross), this sound became not so much an inspiration as a *format* for generations of movie composers, like so much else in this music. A series of dances for the Bride and her prospective husband follow, leading to the appearance of the Revivalist and the couple’s wedding. What follows is the celebrated series of variations on the Shaker melody *Simple Gifts*, the music for a series of tableaux depicting the Bride and her husband in scenes of daily life after their nuptials. Both the idea of a set of variations and the theme itself were given to Copland by Martha Graham, who was herself from a strictly Presbyterian family in rural Pennsylvania; the more worldly Copland, who had manufactured several bogus

folksongs for his earlier ballets, raided a book of Shaker melodies for the definitive version. For the record, he finally met a real Shaker for the first time in 1974.

The work ends with the Bride and her husband, in the words of the scenario, “quiet and strong” in their new house. Copland was fond of saying that the proceeds from this music also left him in a new house – in rural (!) Cortlandt Manor, NY.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)

CELLO CONCERTO in E minor, Op. 104

Composed: 1894–1895

Premiered: London, England, 1895

In 1894, Antonín Dvořák was in his third year as Director of the National Conservatory of Music of America, which had been founded ten years earlier by the stupendously wealthy Jeanette Thurber. Mrs. Thurber personally saw to it that the Czech would accept the Directorship by the simple expedient of setting his salary at a slightly frightening \$15,000 per year, thus making him by a very long way the highest-paid academic in the United States. If Dvořák himself was priced at \$15,000, his cello concerto—or at least its premiere—came to be bought for the less alarming (if more intriguing) sum of two pigeons.

Dvořák spent most of his composing career swearing that he would never write a cello concerto; he thought that the instrument simply could not sustain a solo part, with its (to him) weak bass and thin treble. What seems to have changed his mind was his attendance at the first (and second) performance of a cello concerto by his Conservatory colleague Victor Herbert, whose fame as the composer of *Babes in Toyland* was still some ten years away. In the meantime, Herbert was simply trying to bridge the enormous gap between his income and Dvořák’s—only to find the Czech composer seizing his ideas on how to write a solo cello part and turning them into what became a concert standard. The central movement of Herbert’s work is in E minor—Dvořák’s key—and has, well, eerie similarities to parts of Dvořák’s concerto. This would be a good, if ironic, point to mention Herbert’s lifelong stand for composer’s copyrights, which earned him a statue in New York.

Dvořák’s friend, the cellist Hanuš Wihan, had been nagging him for a concerto for some years, so it seemed natural that Wihan should play the first performance. However, friction arose over two cadenzas that Wihan proposed to insert into the work (essentially large, frantic and inappropriate explosions of virtuosity at points where Wihan thought the cellist had too little to do); an alternate soloist needed to be found. The English cellist Leo Stern, who had met Dvořák in Prague, put himself forward for the privilege in a letter accompanied by—incredibly—two pigeons. Dvořák, an inveterate pigeon fancier

whose birds drove his New York neighbors to distraction, recognized two rare breeds—and Stern had a deal. Wihan finally got to play the concerto—minus his cadenzas—three years later.

The concerto opens with a subject that will not only pervade the first movement but also return in the third, giving the piece as a whole an “arch” structure that ties the structure together while allowing the music to expand into what might otherwise have been mere rhapsodizing, especially in the slow movement. A pattern is set up: the orchestra states material, then the soloist expands and comments on it, usually on a steadily increasing technical gradient that includes an infamous passage of triple-stops and a truly daunting causeway of octaves and double-stops in the coda.

The long slow movement also includes grim challenges to the soloist, in the form of simultaneous double-stops and open-string *pizzicati*, which were sufficiently novel to lead Wihan to ask Dvořák if he was actually serious. The soloist’s harmonics in the closing pages had previously been known more or less as a virtuoso parlor trick. Perhaps more than any other concerto for the instrument up to that time, Dvořák’s cello concerto firmly declares itself off limits to all but the most expert players.

The finale is, conventionally enough, a rondo, whose cyclically-returning theme is declared quietly by the horn at the outset. This theme is then visited by a succession of episodes, including quotations from Dvořák’s song-cycle *The Cypresses*, the favorite work of his sister-in-law Josefina Čermakova, who died soon after he started composing the concerto. This emotional shadow drives the music into an alarming series of remote keys (C-A-C sharp!-B flat!!) before finally morphing into an affirmative B major. Themes from the first and second movements make final contributions to the discussion before the concerto ends in a blaze of glory.

If Victor Herbert had his feathers ruffled by the Dvořák cello concerto, another, arguably more eminent, composer was more positive: "If I had known that it was possible to compose such a concerto for the cello, I would have tried it myself!"

Thus stated Johannes Brahms—and what a pity he didn’t!