

YOUNG CLASSICAL WRITERS PRIZE 2021



That Time of Evening

by **Mark Rogers** (age 22) – First Prize
on **Samuel Barber's Knoxville: Summer of 1915**

The first time I heard Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, I was overwhelmed by homesickness. I was living outside America for the first time, six months into a degree in Glasgow, and feeling fortunate to be away from what felt like a quickly spreading political and social dumpster fire. But this piece was stunning in the clarity of its nostalgia, and despite its romantic beauty, there was no rose-coloured hue to it. Plus there was a strange similarity to my own life. Many of the great sopranos who have sung this work feel that exact same thing, including (my favorite) Leontyne Price, who said 'As a southerner, it expresses everything I know about my roots and about my mama and father...my home town... You can smell the south in it.'

Samuel Barber must have felt this too when he read James Agee's poem in the spring of 1947. After two wars and staggering loss of life, the world would have felt terminally bleak, a feeling compounded by the declining health of his father. Barber was already in discussions with conductor Serge Koussevitsky to write something for voice and orchestra and, before the exact details had been arranged, the music was completed in just several days.

Narrated by a five-year-old boy as evening passes into twilight in Tennessee, the work opens with the view from a front porch in downtown Knoxville. Woodwinds give way to lush strings and flute in a clever musical depiction of rocking chairs. The soprano joins us in semi recitative. She sings about birds and we hear a cuckoo in the clarinet; a passing automobile is given a quiet doppler effect in low brass; couples walk in pairs and a flute duet joins them, everything as casual as it is hypnotic.

A sudden flash gives way to the sound of an old car horn, almost comically depicted as a bouncing major seventh; this clown honk turns into a surprisingly emotive melody with sinister overtones. For James Agee, whose father was killed in an automobile accident in 1916, the danger is explicit. I had difficulty with this middle episode which seemed, at first, out of place with the lyricism on either side of it. Now I realise this clanking machinery anticipates an impending loss of innocence for its narrator, but for now, this is still far off and the car turns the corner. 'The faint stinging bell; rises again still fainter; fainting, lifting, lifts, faints forgone: forgotten.'

The sound of crickets in the high strings focuses us back on the grassy lawn, leading us into one of the most ravishing phrases in the piece. 'Now is the night one blue dew,' she sings, ascending to a long pianissimo high B flat for 'blue dew,' a note which Leontyne Price holds in her

recording for a breathtaking two extra bars. Small wonder she was Barber's favourite soprano. The stars come out, father coils the hose, and the mood of suburban pastoral returns.

This is the scene that is so recognisable, it is the prototypical southern evening: a small collection of aunts and parents spread on grass and in chairs 'talking of nothing at all in particular'. Every hearing for me is like watching an old home video, it is just so familiar.

Apart from being simply beautiful or cleverly written, the best music has the power to leave you and your world clearer, and I can't think of anything that does this better for me. As the poem says, 'Who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts in the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night?' Samuel Barber certainly comes close.

Mark Rogers