

# **FOUR AMERICAN PIANO SONATAS**

**EDWARD MACDOWELL, No.2 "Eroica" (1895)**

**CHARLES GRIFFES, Sonata (1918)**

**ROSS LEE FINNEY, No.4 "Christmastime 1945"**

**SAMUEL BARBER, Sonata, Op. 26 (1949)**

## **PROGRAMMATIC REMARKS**

The four American piano sonatas here represented cover the period 1895 - 1949. They show two complementary aesthetic tendencies, two lines of musical thought that reaffirm our inheritance of 19<sup>th</sup> century European culture while developing an emerging 20<sup>th</sup> century American one: The heroic tendency, manifested musically in terms of a transcendent virtuosity overcoming all obstacles, and the tendency of exposing deep personal sentiment in an identifiable collective idiom - the rhythms, melodies, harmonies and colors of American musical speech.

Formally, the two *heroic* four movement sonatas (the MacDowell, in an earlier format, had programmatic titles relating the whole to the legend of Arthur) move from sonata allegro structures through scherzos and slow movements to culminating fast-paced finales (the Barber ends with a triumphant fugue). The shorter sonatas, chronologically the middle two (1918 and 1945), each representative of different styles within the idiomatic continuum, present multisectional music breathed out "in one breath" - a condensation of the timescale. Cross-cutting these formal procedures, two sonatas end in fierce bursts of energy (Griffes and Barber), two quietly subside with a feeling of meditation and gathering repose (MacDowell and Finney).

As to content, all four, in different ways, reach a critical point: the dynamic of conflict between motor energy and nostalgic lyricism, between the will to create a vital future and rumination on the past - aggression/passivity, resolved in favor of one or the other - two paths of discovery and fulfillment. Underlying that dynamic is always an abundance of instrumental flair and resourcefulness, of driving the piano to its fullest destiny as an instrument of power, allusion and complexity.

Although a retrospective of the American piano sonata would include, in addition to these works, the sonatas of Ives, Sessions, Copland, Carter and others, my hope in presenting works by these four composers is two-fold: that the listener can sense and derive pleasure from the interplay of an indigenous musical speech, variously accented, with timeless and borderless musical meanings; and that the listener can feel himself to be a part, if only while the music lasts, of that unfolding vital future these pieces so eloquently project.

William Doppmann

## PROGRAM NOTES

by William Doppmann

### **Sonata No. 2 in G minor Op. 50 “Eroica” - Edward MacDowell**

The second of Edward MacDowell's four piano sonatas was composed in 1895, seven years after his return to America from Germany where he had studied, composed and taught during most of his early professional life. The “hero” of its title is King Arthur, portrayed in the opening movement, followed by the two main instrumentalities of his legendary fate: Merlin the magician (scherzo) and Queen Guinevere (slow movement). The fierce and tempestuous finale depicts his battle with Mordred, his son, and the slow coda suggests his dissolution and apotheosis. The music is epic in its breadth, with tunes and motives constructed and recycled with Wagnerian precision and allusiveness, and the piano style draws upon the full technical resources of MacDowell's foremost European champion, Franz Liszt.

### **Sonata - Charles Tomlinson Griffes**

The American composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes, though better known for exotically colored short piano works like *The White Peacock*, set his personal stamp with greatest power and economy on his piano sonata of 1918. Subsuming a fast—slow—fast movement design into one unbroken whole, the materials of the sonata derive rigorously from an altered B flat minor scale which yields, surprisingly, a D major triad. The tension of these polarized tonalities, along with more conventional contrasts of tempo and mood, provide a scenario of memorable and haunting drama and lyricism.

### **Sonata No. 4 in E Major “Christmastime 1945” - Ross Lee Finney**

The distinguished American pianist and editor John Kirkpatrick has written the following commentary on Ross Lee Finney's fourth Piano Sonata: The first draft of this sonata was composed rapidly and is a spontaneous juxtaposing of various moods in relation to the central fact of Christmas, as symbolized by the Hymn. The Invention has something of jingling gayety, and the Nocturne of starry mystery and awe. The Toccata, however, suddenly harks back to the wartime tensions of the previous Christmas season, but is more concerned with the general chaos of those years, and reaches a point of frustration at which the final chords (as Finney has put it in conversation) “get stuck” and seem to have to turn toward the Hymn. The dedication is to a group of co-workers in the OSS, who were all involved in the same operations, and who celebrated Christmas 1944 together.

## Sonata, Op. 26 - Samuel Barber

Samuel Barber's Sonata of 1949 was commissioned by the League of Composers for its twenty-fifth anniversary and was first performed by Vladimir Horowitz. It is a four-movement work that shows the heroic intent of many of its nineteenth-century predecessors. The work's musical energy, though it ebbs and flows from a fierce, commanding sonata allegro through a scintillating scherzo and sorrowful slow movement seems directed from the start toward the brilliant fugue-finale. Two intervallic cells, incessantly reiterated and developed, establish this inexorable pathway; the falling two-note figure B/B flat, heard defiantly in the opening Allegro and plangently in the Adagio; and an upward surge of major and minor thirds first introduced as accompaniment to the opening movement's first two themes, and organizing architecturally the successive keys of the four movements. The fugue, which builds its subject likewise by ascending thirds, is a marvel of ingenious contrapuntal control, drawing from its logically arrived-at musical materials the required climactic power to conclude this highly personal and deeply felt sonata in the spirit of flamboyant virtuosity.

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## COMPOSER BIOGRAPHIES

### EDWARD ALEXANDER MACDOWELL

(b. December 18, 1861 in NY, d. January 23, 1908 in NY)

MacDowell received his formal training in Europe, first at the Paris Conservatory (1876-78) and later at the Frankfurt Conservatory where his unusual talent in piano and composition was recognized. In 1882 he accepted a post at the Darmstadt Conservatory and settled in Wiesbaden until his return to the U.S. in 1884.



All of MacDowell's orchestral works were performed by the Boston Symphony almost as soon as they were completed and his fame spread rapidly. When Columbia University created a chair of music in 1896, the trustees unanimously chose MacDowell as the first incumbent, citing him as "the greatest musical genius America has produced." In 1904 MacDowell presented his resignation after a series of publicized disputes in which MacDowell was accused of a lack of propriety in making public an intra-mural academic disagreement. His health began to fail and



physicians diagnosed his illness as a gradual disintegration of the brain tissues (1905). MacDowell spent the last years of his life in a child-like state, unconscious of his identity and his environment. In 1906, an appeal was launched for funds to support the ailing composer by a significant roster of public figures including Horatio Parker, Victor Herbert, Arthur Foote, George Chadwick, Frederick Converse, Andrew Carnegie, J.Pierpont Morgan, and former President Grover Cleveland.

Shortly after MacDowell's death, a group of his admirers raised \$50,000 and organized the MacDowell Memorial Association. Mrs. MacDowell deeded to the Association her husband's summer residence at Peterborough, NY which subsequently became The MacDowell Colony, a retreat for American composers and writers.

MacDowell occupies a very high place among American composers and was the first American composer of stature who incorporated indigenous elements in his music and depicted, in Romantic colors, the landscape of America.

## CHARLES TOMLINSON GRIFFES

(b. September 17, 1884 in Elmira, NY, d. April 8, 1920 in NY)

Griffes studied piano and organ in his home town until 1903 when he went to Berlin to study with Gottfried Galston (piano) and Rüfer and Humperdinck (composition). To eke out his living, he gave private lessons and played his own compositions in public recitals. In 1907 he returned to the U.S. and took a music teacher's job at the Hackley School for Boys at Tarrytown, NY while continuing to study music by himself. He was fascinated by the exotic art of the French Impressionists and investigated the potentialities of Oriental scales. He also was strongly influenced by the Russian school, particularly Mussorgsky and Scriabin. A combination of natural talent and determination to acquire a high degree of craftsmanship elevated Griffes to the position of a foremost American composer in the Impressionist genre. Despite his untimely death, he had achieved recognition through performances by Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra (a symphonic version of his piano work *The White Peacock* 1919), the Boston Symphony (the tone poem *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan* 1919), and others. His works retain an enduring place in American music.



## ROSS LEE FINNEY

(b. December 23, 1906 in Wells, MN, d. February 4, 1997 in Carmel, CA)

Finney's early musical experiences incorporated a wide range of interests. He played cello, piano, and guitar, and was a member of a trio at the age of 12 and a jazz group at 21. He continued to sing and play guitar for many years, and in 1960, toured Greece performing American folk music. His early study in composition was at the University of Minnesota with Donald Ferguson and at Carleton College, where he later taught cello and history. Finney also studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris (1927-8), with Edward Burlingame Hill at Harvard University (1928-9), with Alban Berg in Vienna (1931-2), and with Roger Sessions (1935).



From 1929 to 1948, Finney was a member of the faculty of Smith College. He was awarded both Guggenheim and Pulitzer fellowships in 1937, and from 1943 to 1945 he served in the Office of Strategic Services. A second Guggenheim Fellowship followed in 1947, and in 1949, he was appointed professor of music and composer-in-residence at the University of Michigan. Providing music for the chamber groups of the university's School of Music, and the need to define his ideas on the nature of music for his advanced students, contributed to a decade of great creative energy. In 1974, Finney retired from his position as Head of the composition department leaving behind a legacy of developing younger composers including William Albright, Leslie Bassett, George Crumb, William Doppmann, Roger Reynolds, and George Wilson.

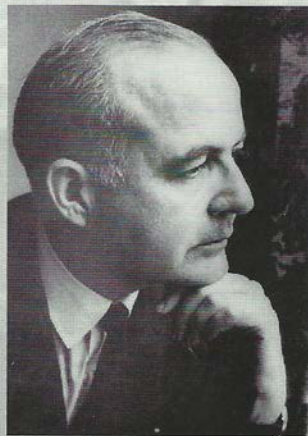
Finney was a prolific composer all his life and left an imposing body of works in every genre including symphonies, oratorios, an opera, and a diverse array of chamber and solo works. His many honors include a Rome Prize (1960), the Brandeis Medal (1968), and numerous commissions, among them those from the Coolidge and Koussevitzky foundations and from Yehudi Menuhin for the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. In 1962 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

## SAMUEL BARBER

(b. March 9, 1910 in West Chester, PA, d. January 23, 1991 in NY)

Barber's mother was an accomplished pianist and her sister, the famous opera contralto Louise Homer. At the age of 14, Barber enrolled in the newly formed Curtis Institute where he studied piano, composition and conducting (with Fritz Reiner). In 1935 Barber received a Pulitzer traveling scholarship and the American Prix de Rome which resulted in his Symphony No. 1, the first American work to be presented at the Salzburg Festival of Contemporary Music (1937). In 1938 Toscanini conducted the NBC Symphony Orchestra in Barber's Essay for Orchestra No. 1 and *Adagio for Strings* (arranged from his String Quartet). The *Adagio* was destined to become one of the most popular American works of serious music.

From 1939, Barber intermittently taught orchestration at the Curtis Institute until he joined the Army Air Force in 1942 during which time he wrote his second symphony (performed by Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1944).



Barber had a lifelong interest in the theater. *The Serpent Heart*, a ballet written for Martha Graham (1946) later became the orchestral suite *Medea's Meditation and Dance of Vengeance*. After his *Prayers of Kierkegaard* for Soprano, Chorus, and Orchestra (1954) came his first opera *Vanessa* (1958), with a romantic libretto by his lifelong friend Gian Carlo Menotti which was produced by the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1958 and earned Barber his first Pulitzer Prize. *Anthony and Cleopatra* was composed for the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House in 1966. A succession of distinguished piano music, including his Concerto (1962) which won him his second Pulitzer Prize, his Piano Sonata (introduced by Vladimir Horowitz in 1949) and the witty piano suite *Excursions* (1945) established him as a major keyboard composer.

Barber held three Guggenheim fellowships and an honorary degree of Doctor of Fine Arts from Harvard University.



## MacDowell, Edward

Sonata No. 2 in G minor Op. 50 "Eroica" (1895)	22:48
1. Slow with nobility	7:23
2. Elf-like, as light and swift as possible	3:40
3. Tenderly, longingly, yet with passion	4:20
4. Fiercely, very fast	7:25

## Griffes, Charles

Sonata (1918)	13:54
5. Feroce	6:20
6. Molto tranquillo	3:19
7. Allegro vivace	4:15

## Finney, Ross Lee

Sonata No. 4 in E major "Christmastime 1945"	13:33
8. I. Hymn <i>adagio sostenuto</i>	1:17
9. II. Invention <i>allegro giocoso</i>	2:54
10. III. Nocturne <i>andante penseroso</i>	4:50
11. IV. Toccata <i>presto energico</i>	2:47
12. V. Hymn <i>maestoso</i>	1:45

## Barber, Samuel

Sonata Op. 26 (1949)	18:14
13. Allegro energico	6:43
14. Presto e leggero	2:05
15. Adagio mesto	4:47
16. Fuga: Allegro con spirito	4:39

**Total Time: 68:29**

## On the Cover

*Barranca No. 1* by Henry C. Finney, painter, writer and son of the late composer Ross Lee Finney. Mr. Finney's work has been widely exhibited in both the Southwest and the Northeast and in New York City, and is part of numerous private collections including IBM's. He is listed in the 1995 Marquis' Who's Who in the East and in the 1998 and 1999 Who's Who in the West. In addition to painting and printmaking, Mr. Finney writes poetry, essays and gives lectures addressing his concern with social issues of the contemporary art world, art criticism and Zen Buddhism. He resides and works in Los Alamos, NM. *Barranca No. 1* is part of the collection of Margaret and Haskell Rothstein of Ann Arbor, MI.

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