

Program Notes  
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By Composer in Residence Bruce Brown

**Adagio For Strings**

Samuel Barber (1910-81) wrote stubbornly and skillfully in his own richly-expressive style as the winds of 20th-century experimentation blew all around him.

His achingly beautiful *Adagio for Strings* is one of the icons of 20<sup>th</sup> century music. It is often heard on concert programs, and has been chosen for the soundtracks of several dramatic films including *Platoon*, *Elephant Man* and *Lorenzo's Oil*.

The *Adagio* was written in 1936 as the second movement of a string quartet. Barber realized immediately he had written something very special and adapted it for string orchestra to make it available to a wider audience. Later he produced a choral version with the text *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God").

The music was reportedly inspired by the great Roman poet Virgil, who described in verse how a tiny rivulet can grow into a mighty stream. Barber's music certainly begins with a tiny trickle, and grows steadily, little by little, until it reaches a stunningly powerful and moving climax.

**The Holberg Suite**

Edvard Grieg was born June 15, 1843 in Bergen, Norway, and died in the same city on September 4, 1907. Throughout his life his music was tinged with a special beauty and sensitivity that seemed to grow out of his Norwegian sensibility.

Grieg is well known for his incidental music to Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt* and for a sumptuous piano concerto. In 1865, Grieg and another composer, Rikard Nordraak, established the Euterpe Society to promote Scandinavian music. Nordraak also helped Grieg develop a keen interest in Norwegian folk music that influenced many of his own compositions.

When Grieg died, at the age of sixty-four, a crowd of almost 40,000 people gathered on the streets of Bergen to honor him.

Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) was a lively and influential writer often known as the "father of Scandinavian letters." Holberg also lived in Bergen for a time, and the city asked Grieg to write a piece of music to honor the bicentennial of his birth. Grieg responded with a colorful work for piano four-hands that he called *Fra Holbergs tid*, "From Holberg's Time." Since Holberg was a contemporary of Bach and Handel, Grieg wrote the music in what he considered a Baroque style and subtitled the piece *Suite i gammel stil*, "Suite in Olden Style."

The piano version was such a hit that Grieg decided to arrange the music for string orchestra.

**Serenade in E, Op. 22**

In 1875, life took a great turn for the better for Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904). For one thing, his young wife had just given birth to their first child. Dvořák had been

working as a church organist and teaching, but his meager pay hadn't been enough to lift his family out of poverty. That all changed when a distinguished jury, including the venerable composer Johannes Brahms, reviewed his work and recommended him for a healthy stipend from the Austrian government.

Suddenly he had enough money to live comfortably and concentrate on composing, and he celebrated by writing his fifth symphony, several chamber works, and this beautiful string serenade. He apparently became very interested in writing five-part music for strings about this time. He also wrote a fine string quintet!

The most remarkable thing about the serenade may be the rapid pace of its composition; Dvořák finished it in only twelve days, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of May.

The piece abounds with the beauty and warmth so often found in Dvořák's music, and it reveals deep insight about string playing and the nature of stringed instruments.

### **Italian Symphony**

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) showed tremendous musical talent at a very early age. In his teens he wrote several symphonies and concertos, and when he was sixteen he produced two masterpieces: his wonderful String Octet and the sublime Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Mendelssohn's family had the means to help him develop his talent, and when he was twenty, his father sent him on a three-year trip "to examine the various countries closely." As Mendelssohn described it, "I was to make my name and gifts known, and was to press forward in my work."

A long sojourn in England inspired his *Scottish Symphony* and *Hebrides Overture* before he left for Italy in May of 1830. Mendelssohn visited Venice, Florence, Rome and Naples, and he later declared that all of Italy – its people, its landscapes and its art – helped to inspire his *Symphony No. 4, in A Major, Op. 90*, the "Italian Symphony."

Mendelssohn started work on his new symphony in Italy, and continued to work on it in the winter of 1832 after he had returned to Germany, but characteristically, he was dissatisfied with the music. Finally, a commission from the London Philharmonic Society goaded him into finishing it, and he conducted the première on May 13, 1833. Mendelssohn always felt the first and last movements needed to be completely rewritten, even though many have considered the symphony a model of perfection, and it wasn't published until 1851, four years after his death.

Two lively Italian dances are suggested in the music, a *tarantella* in the first movement, and a *saltarello* in the last. The second movement is a solemn procession, probably inspired by a pilgrim's march Mendelssohn witnessed in Naples. The Minuet and trio combine the poise and balance of a Classical approach with richer harmony and stronger feeling of a Romantic style. Like all of Mendelssohn's work, the music is full of beauty, clarity and lightness.