

AMERICAN CLASSICS

BARBER AND COPLAND

SEAN KENNARD, piano



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SAMUEL BARBER

Sonata for Piano, Op. 26 ♦ Ballade, Op. 46
Excursions, Op. 20

AARON COPLAND

Piano Variations ♦ Four Piano Blues

SEAN KENNARD, piano

Total Playing Time: 55:07



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SAMUEL BARBER (1910–1981):

Sonata for Piano, Op. 26 (18:24)

1. Allegro energico (6:59)
2. Allegro vivace e leggero (1:59)
3. Adagio mesto (5:28)
4. Fuga: Allegro con spirito (3:58)

5. **Ballade**, Op. 46 (5:12)

Excursions, Op. 20 (11:54)

6. Un poco allegro (3:10)
7. In slow blues tempo (3:37)
8. Allegretto (2:51)
9. Allegro molto (2:16)

AARON COPLAND (1900–1990):

10. **Piano Variations** (10:53)

Four Piano Blues (8:37)

11. For Leo Smit—Freely poetic (2:28)
12. For Andor Foldes—Soft and languid (2:31)
13. For William Kapell—Muted and sensuous (2:34)
14. For John Kirkpatrick—With bounce (1:06)

SEAN KENNARD, piano

Total Playing Time: 55:07

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

For his Delos debut album, brilliant emerging keyboard virtuoso Sean Kennard has chosen piano music by two of America's most iconic composers: Samuel Barber and Aaron Copland.

The first and third of the album's Barber works—his *Sonata for Piano* and four-piece *Excursions*—are closely associated with another virtuoso, legendary Russian-American pianist Vladimir Horowitz, who premiered both works. After Horowitz's resounding success in 1945 with the first, second and fourth pieces from *Excursions* (the third wasn't played because Schirmer—Barber's publisher—omitted it from the first edition), the composer naturally had Horowitz in mind while working on the sonata (composed between 1947 and 1949). Horowitz's virtuosity no doubt influenced the sonata's often fiendish technical difficulty. And while Barber originally envisioned his sonata as a three-movement work, Horowitz prevailed upon him to end it with a "very flashy" fourth movement.

Owing to the prevailing judgment that Barber's earlier music reverted to a more Romantic era, the composer resolved to craft his new work using more up-to-date compositional techniques, including much

more chromaticism and dissonance than he had used before, as well as twelve-tone style. Such modern techniques notwithstanding, Barber cast all four movements in traditional forms. Upon its 1949 premiere, the ***Sonata for Piano*** was immediately pronounced an American masterpiece. Horowitz himself called it "the first truly great native work in the form."

The first movement—*Allegro energico*—is in sonata-allegro form. It's a marvel of headlong intensity, contrasting Barber's penchant for free-flowing lyrical passages with craggy rhythmic shifts and angular harmonies. The following *Allegro vivace e leggero* is a sparkling and fleet-fingered scherzo with exquisitely delicate textures. The third movement—marked *Adagio mesto*—takes a darker turn, with particular attention paid to chromaticism and twelve-tone melodies. The final *Fuga: Allegro con spirito* is imbued with much the same spirit with which the sonata began. It's a powerful and hard-driving four-voice fugue that reflects Barber's love of Bach and even expands into five and six mind-bending voices. Listen for the complex rhythms and jazzy harmonies in this final movement, which ends the work with a resounding bang.

The Op. 46 ***Ballade***—Barber's final work for piano—dates from 1977, almost a

year after he had been asked to compose a "*morceau de concours*" (test piece) for the Van Cliburn competition. The piece's rather dark and pensive mood is hardly a surprise, given Barber's loneliness and periodic depression after his nearly forty-year relationship with fellow composer Gian Carlo Menotti had ended a few years earlier. Still, this masterfully crafted work—while expressing distinct feelings of sadness and resignation—stops short of despair or hopelessness.

Written in ABA form, the piece opens with a series of descending chords that are then repeated with minor variation. An abrupt upward surge leads into a memorable theme comprising three motifs that arise from and return to a single chord. From there, a sinking phrase soon dissolves the prevailing harmonic scheme before the near-violent central section erupts: The opening section then repeats, carrying listeners to an ending that breathes quiet acceptance.

In his *Excursions*, Barber built all four movements upon distinctly different aspects of musical Americana, basing each one on either traditional American idioms or folk songs. But despite Barber's often sophisticated elaborations, listeners familiar with such American motifs can clearly hear them.

The opening piece—marked *Un poco allegro*—has a distinctly metropolitan flavor, with its hubbub of skillfully crafted "urban" musical clichés. Barber's biographer, Nathan Broder, described it as a "boogie-woogie," owing to its repetitive bass-line patterns that characterize early American jazz. Listen for its catchy rhythms and playful sense of headlong momentum. The second of these so-called bagatelles, *In slow blues tempo*, reveals an atmosphere of cheeky, stop-and-go complacency, despite what the title may imply.

The third piece, *Allegretto*, takes listeners along on an excursion into the folk music of the American West, with a set of clever variations on the classic Western song "The Streets of Laredo." Beginning as a touching lament, the work's subdued mood is soon dispelled by variations that are alternatively jazzy and frisky. The final *Allegro molto* takes the unmistakable form of a manic square dance, full of thorny rhythms that can test even a virtuoso's abilities.

Many musicologists and classical musicians—and others who respect "modernist" styles and harmonic structures—regard Aaron Copland's *Piano Variations* as one of his most significant early masterpieces. Written in 1930, the work can stand as one of the final outcomes of the years he spent in Paris as a student of the

legendary Nadia Boulanger, who helped expose him to the prevailing styles and emerging musical movements in Europe.

The work's craggy rhythms, sharply dissonant harmonies, twelve-tone elements and astringent textures first met with mixed reviews from performers, audiences and critics. The great German pianist Walter Gieseking—who Copland hoped would perform it—commented that the piece's "crude dissonances" and "severity of style" would alienate most audiences. And its first *New York Times* review was distinctly unfavorable. Yet forward-looking musicians like Leonard Bernstein (among others) came to champion the piece, describing it as "... hard as nails" and a "...synonym for modern music—so prophetic, harsh and wonderful, and so full of modern feeling and thinking."

Most open-minded listeners can follow the progress of the work—a theme and twenty variations—with relative ease, thanks to its four-note theme (E—C—D sharp—C sharp) that serves as the work's building blocks. Once attentive listeners allow these four notes to sink into their musical consciousness, the piece's sense of musical continuity is rarely lost.

Even those listeners who cringe at strong, spiky dissonances—and who have trou-

ble mentally processing the meanderings of the twelve-tone system—will seldom "get lost" in the music. And despite its varying levels of musical appeal, no one can dispute the crucial place the *Piano Variations* will forever hold as a milestone in Copland's musical development.

Copland composed the short pieces that comprise his **Four Piano Blues** at different points in his career. The first two were written in 1926, and the latter two—created in 1947 and 1948—provided melodic content that he adapted for his 1948 *Clarinet Concerto*. But the four pieces weren't published as a set until 1949, after Copland had revised them, determined their sequence, and decided on a dedicatee for each work, drawn from among his friends and colleagues. Each piece thus has a title identifying the person to whom it was dedicated, as well as a subtitle drawn from its tempo marking. All four feature recognizable elements of American jazz and blues, though cloaked somewhat in the impressionistic styles of Debussy and Ravel.

The first piece is "For Leo Smit—Freely poetic" (Leo Smit the American composer-pianist, *not* the Dutch composer of the same name), and reflects a bluesy style and sound reminiscent of Gershwin. The second is "For Andor Foldes—Soft and

languid," Foldes being a famous Hungarian-American pianist. The subtitle certainly reflects the piece's overall mood, but with fleeting moments of a livelier nature. Next comes "For William Kapell—Muted and sensuous," with its substantial opening chords lending the piece a more serious and stately feel. Finally, we hear "For John Kirkpatrick—With bounce." (Both Kapell and Kirkpatrick were renowned pianists as well.) As the subtitle suggests, this is a much more energetic piece, but with a more pensive alternate theme.

—Lindsay Koob

American pianist **Sean Kennard** has won top prizes in the Queen Elisabeth Competition, the Sendai International Music Competition, the Hilton Head International Piano Competition, the National Chopin Piano Competition of the USA, the Iowa Piano Competition and the American Pianists Association, among others.

Among his critical accolades is *The Washington Post's* praise for Kennard's "powerful and involved music making," describing him as "a strong, luminous pianist." His debut album received a rave review in *American Record Guide*, which pronounced it "a hidden gem," attesting to

the pianist's "perfect blend of lyricism and romantic passion, huge romantic sound, and bold melodic vision." It further proclaimed that he "plays Chopin's Preludes with more poise and vision than most pianists who have recorded them." *Fanfare* named the album "a very desirable disc," citing "Kennard's mastery of Chopin's idiom" and "impression of complete effortlessness." Naxos Records released his album of sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti in 2017.

Sean has performed as soloist with orchestras around the world, including the Prague Radio Symphony, Osaka Symphony Orchestra, National Orchestra of Belgium, Chamber Orchestra of Frankfurt, Montevideo Philharmonic, Charleston Symphony Orchestra, and the Honolulu Symphony Orchestra.

He has appeared in solo recitals and chamber music concerts in such venues as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, Salle Cortot, Brussels' Palais des Beaux-arts, Fryderyk Chopin Society in Warsaw, Teatro Caio Melisso in Spoleto, Tokyo Opera City Hall, Seoul Arts Center, Hong Kong City Hall and many more.

Sean was born in San Diego to an American father and Japanese mother, and grew up in Hawaii, where he began to study piano with Ellen Masaki on his tenth birthday.



After less than two years of formal study, he won the Chopin International Competition of the Pacific in Hawaii at age eleven, then went on to perform Chopin's 24 Etudes in recital on his 13th birthday, and later that year began studies with Eleanor Sokoloff at the Curtis Institute of Music. After winning the school's Sergei Rachmaninoff Award, given to one graduating pianist each year, he went on to study at

The Juilliard School and Yale School of Music with Boris Berman, Richard Goode, Enrique Graf, Jerome Lowenthal, and Robert McDonald. He has been named a Harvey Fellow by the Mustard Seed Foundation and is now on the faculty at Stetson University's School of Music as chair of the piano department. He continues to perform solo recitals and with orchestras throughout the world.

SPECIAL THANKS

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For more information about the artist, go to seankennard.com

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