

Salt Bay Chamberfest – August 15, 2017

ANGEL LAM *Fragrance of the Sea* *World Premiere and SBC co-commission with Copland House*

AARON COPLAND Sextet

ANTONIN DVORAK String Quartet No. 14 in A-flat major, Op. 105

Travel has long been a source of inspiration to artists, such as Gauguin in Tahiti or Hemingway in Spain and Africa. In music, a composer can be drawn to innovative new paths by the stimulation of sounds in a new environment, whether they be an unconventional scale pattern, the timbre of different instruments, or alternative approaches to rhythm. At the age of 21, Aaron Copland struck out from his childhood home in Brooklyn to study in Paris where he was thrust into the center of modernist music, writing, and art. Angel Lam has studied both in the United States (Yale and Peabody) and in Hong Kong, and for the world premiere work on tonight's program, writes about the migratory path of her family through China to New York. Antonín Dvořák, who gained fame by composing music derived from Bohemian and Slavonic peasant dances, came to America and was thrilled to hear the polyglot mixture of cultures that confronted him on the streets of New York. He recommended that American composers generate their symphonies out of the folk music that surrounded them—advice that subsequently became fulfilled through such music as that of Copland and, generations later, Lam.

During his few years in America as director of the National Conservatory in New York, Dvořák was stimulated by the astonishingly global mixture of sounds he encountered. The pieces he composed during his American journey are among the most famous in all of music: the Cello Concerto, the “American” String Quartet, and the Symphony “From the New World.” Although they have been less widely recognized, there are several great works Dvořák wrote while in transition—works he started in the U.S. but finished back home in Bohemia. Among these is the String Quartet in A-flat major, a work of profound depth and compositional integrity made possible only through the perspective Dvořák gained during his stay abroad. The piece picks up where the Cello Concerto leaves off—with longing for home, but with greater optimism, because the journey home is imminent and, by the end of the work, complete.

Throughout the music, the imagination seems to be forming a link between two places; a turning motive is woven into the slow introduction that continues to serve as a germinating figure in the opening Allegro. Dvořák develops this motive continuously in both melodic phrases and accompanimental figures. It is possible that there are some connections to the slow movement of the New World Symphony, which features a melody for English horn inspired by Negro spirituals. This song-like refrain was so effective an evocation of the style that Dvořák's student, Henry Burleigh, lifted the melody and fitted it out with lyrics to create an actual spiritual called “Goin' Home.” In this Quartet, the “home” of the Promised Land seems to be gleefully conflated with Dvořák's actual home in the charging dotted rhythms of the opening movement and in the pentatonic song fragments of the finale. The finale exhibits a playful side that is quite Haydn-esque. A semi-serious, fragmented phrase turns to an unexpected place and becomes transformed into a friendly dance. It's as though Dvořák is showing us that the imagined monster in the closet is really just the family cat under a dressing gown; or, as in Schubert, the death we fear is, in essence, our friend bringing comfort and rest.

While studying in France with Nadia Boulanger, Aaron Copland grew to admire the music of Igor Stravinsky and his approach of fracturing Russian folk music into something strikingly modern. Copland had already used jazz as a basis for a suite for orchestra, *Music for the Theatre*. He subsequently sought to create music with less obvious stylistic references in his Short Symphony. Because the jagged asymmetrical phrases of this piece were deemed too difficult for most orchestras, Copland arranged it for a smaller ensemble, the Sextet. Even in this more manageable form, it has been known to strike fear into performers. In the *New York Times*, Bernard Holland wrote of a performance by Music from Copland House: “For the average player accustomed to Beethoven in 4/4 time, the Sextet is bull riding in a rodeo. [At the MCH concert] it was all exuberance and bright sunshine.” Less dissonant than Stravinsky at his most adventurous, the overall sound of the music is recognizably Copland’s voice, with a playfulness and a profound optimism, inherently connected to dance, and a spaciousness in the middle movement. The last movement is lighter and even more fleet, with greater independence of the instruments, punctuated by accents from the entire group.

The music of Angel Lam has been called “otherworldly” by the *New York Times* and she has written such pieces as *Off the Map* for the Silk Road Ensemble, which received a Grammy nomination. Her music has frequently been engaged in a dialogue about the changing meaning of “place.” She writes that *Fragrance of the Sea* follows her family history:

Using the imagery of river and sea, this piece traces my family's migration from a village town in southern China to the Shanghai of the 1940s, and me growing up in contemporary Hong Kong and finally arriving in New York City. These four movements are nostalgic memories of diversely different seas. Even though the locations and times have changed, the tastes, sentiments, and human instincts have not.

In common with Copland and Dvořák, Lam employs fundamental musical techniques such as scales to evoke another world.

I begin with the pentatonic scale used in classical China, and an ancient Tang dynasty poem. I compose music to the poem—the thousand-year-old language shares similarity with my native tongue, Cantonese. The poem describes a poet, who sees a setting sun and a river running east in the distance. He hints at the departure and farewell of a close friend.

Tracing the river eastward one would arrive at the ancient sea, which ancient people feared. It was a place of no return. The poem continues, “if one wishes to see further, one must go higher, up the steps to the next level to see greater horizon.” What great courage one must have to reach higher and greater distance, risking their lives across oceans.

Through the sea routes, my family arrived at the vibrantly colorful, international Shanghai, adding one more note to our classical scale. It’s a six-note scale against an alluring and feminine Shanghai, which was Chinese, French and international, all at once.

The dancelike extravagant life of Shanghai ended. My family fled the revolution, and arrived at the safe southeast harbor of Hong Kong. Here it is still the Chinese melody that we once knew, but we now have a seven-note scale. For me, arrival in New York, I hear a chromatic scale as the backdrop of Manhattan's carefree and optimistic ocean.

By Mark Mandarano