

Arizona Philharmonic
October 5, 2025
Music Reimagined: Memory, Motion, and Light
Program notes by J. Michael Allsen

The Arizona Philharmonic opens its eighth season with a varied program of works for string orchestra, opening with Javier Álvarez’s energetic *Metro Chabacano*, named for a busy subway station in his native Mexico City. Next is Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*, an emotional work that will certainly bring up strong associations for nearly every listener. One of Mozart’s most popular pieces, *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* is a serenade he composed in 1787 for reasons that are now lost. Béla Bartók’s *Romanian Folk Dances* is based upon dance tunes he collected on trips through remote Romanian villages a few years earlier. Then we present an astonishingly beautiful 2010 work by Augusta Read Thomas, her *Of Paradise and Light*. Our closer is Benjamin Britten’s delightful *Simple Symphony*; a piece written by a 20-year-old composer reworking music he had written “between the ages of nine and twelve.”

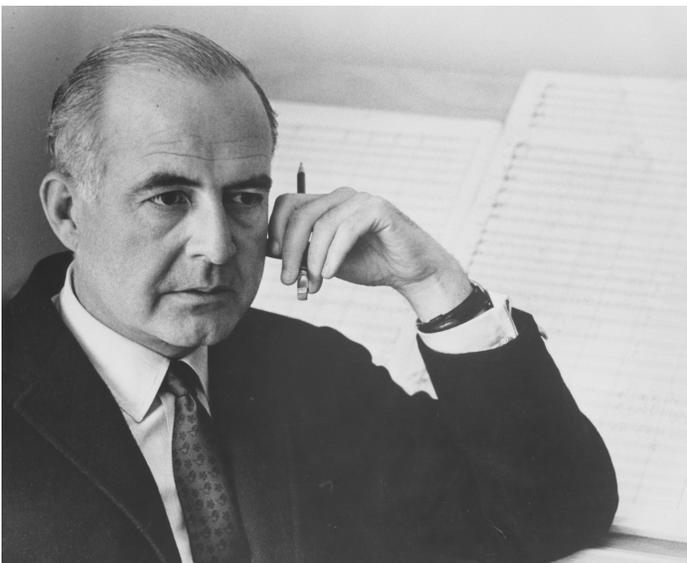
The late **Javier Álvarez (1956-2023)** was a Mexican teacher, academic, and composer noted for his eclectic use of various musical styles from Mexico and around the world, and also for blending unusual instrumentations and electronic music. After initial studies in his native Mexico City, at the National Conservatory of Music, he did graduate study at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and at the Royal College of Music in London. After spending some 25 years teaching in Britain, Álvarez returned to Mexico, to direct conservatories in the states of Michoacán and Yucatán. Álvarez said the following about *Metro Chabacano*:

Metro Nativitas, Metro Taxqueña, and Metro Chabacano are stations belonging to one of the lines of the vast Mexico City subway system. My pieces, however, do not seek to portray any particular sonic or visual aspect of the subway. Rather, I



hear these pieces like short imaginary cyclical journeys across fleeting urban landscapes. And given their similar inspirational origins and styles I have recently decided to group them under the collective title of *Línea 2*. *Metro Chabacano* has a continuous eighth-note movement of moderately driving speed from which short melodic solos from each instrument emerge in turn. The repeated notes give a false sense of simplicity for, although the phrases are mostly periodic, the rhythms, accents, and fleeting melodic fragments intricately belie the flow of the *moto perpetuo*. *Metro Chabacano* (1991) was commissioned for the Cuarteto Latinoamericano by visual artist Marcos Límenes.

Álvarez composed this work in 1986 with a different title. However, at the request of Límenes, he recomposed the work as *Metro Chabacano*. The Cuarteto Latinoamericano played the premiere in September 1991, at the opening of an exhibition of Límenes' sculptures in the metro station. The string orchestra version heard here was published in 2013. This is an intense six-minute journey, built, largely on a repeating figure in the low strings, that shifts meters just often enough to keep the other parts off balance. The train pulls abruptly into the station, before a witty tongue-in-cheek ending.



In 1937, when the venerable conductor Arturo Toscanini was organizing the group that was to become the NBC Symphony Orchestra, he expressed an interest in programming new music by American composers. His colleague Artur Rodzinsky suggested the young **Samuel Barber (1910-1981)**. Toscanini contacted Barber and Barber promptly sent two new works: his *First Essay for Orchestra*, and an arrangement for string orchestra of the *Adagio* movement of his *String Quartet*

No. 1 (1936). Barber waited through the orchestra's first season for a reply and when the scores were finally returned without comment, he began dejectedly to look for a new orchestra to play them. In the summer of 1938, Barber was in Italy with his partner Gian-Carlo Menotti. Menotti suggested a visit to the Toscaninis at their summer villa, but Barber refused to go. When Toscanini asked why Barber had not come, Menotti offered a weak excuse about Barber being ill. Toscanini replied:

“Oh, he’s perfectly well; he’s just angry with me, but he has no reason to be. I’m going to do *both* of his pieces.” (It seems that Toscanini had already memorized the scores—he did not ask for them again until the day before the concert!) Both works were successful at their November 1938 premiere, and Toscanini recorded both soon afterwards with the NBC Orchestra.



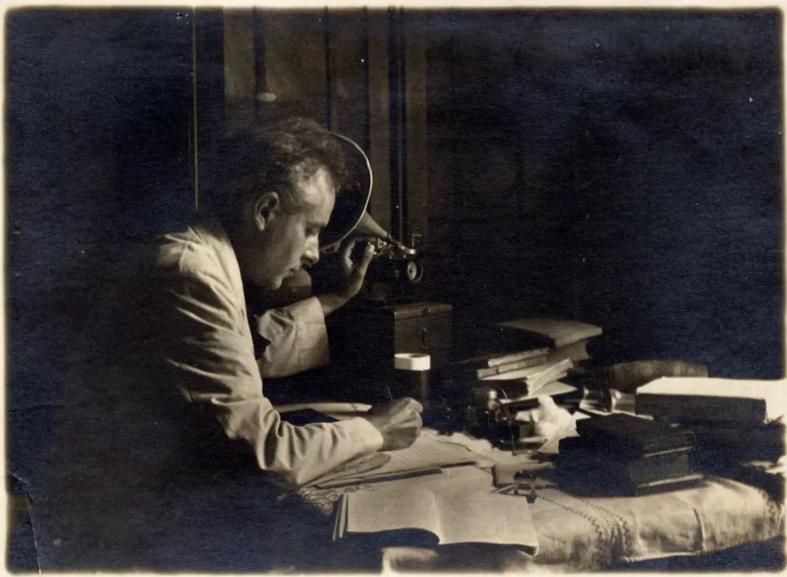
The *Adagio for Strings* has come to have an association with tragedy—particularly with great public events of death and mourning—that Barber never really intended. It was played directly after the radio announcement of President Roosevelt’s death in 1945, and similarly after the Kennedy assassination in 1963. (In my case, I well remember performing in an orchestra concert a few weeks after the 9/11 attacks, when the *Adagio* was played at the beginning—to devastating emotional effect—as an unannounced tribute to the victims.) Because of these associations, it has also been used in film and television to underscore tragic moments—most famously in *Platoon* and *The Elephant Man*, but also in many other scores. Shortly after Barber’s

death, composer Ned Rorem said of the *Adagio*: “If Barber, twenty-five years old when it was completed, later reached higher, he never reached deeper into the heart.” It is the stark simplicity of this music that makes it so effective. A simple melody builds gradually from its quiet beginning through thickening texture, canonic imitation, and increasing dissonance to an intense emotional climax as the violins reach their highest register. After this peak, there is a brief return to the opening texture and a quiet conclusion that dies away to nothingness.

Travelers’ descriptions of late-18th-century Austria often remarked on one of the most beloved Austrian musical traditions, the street serenade. These works, variously titled *Serenade*, *Cassation*, *Notturmo*, or *Nachtmusik*, were typically played by small ensembles hired to play for a lover, a friend, or a special event: engagements, weddings, or “name-days.” (Your name-day in Catholic Austria is the feast day of the saint for whom you are named.) **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**

(1756-1791) wrote dozens of these pieces, ranging from simple marches to more substantial pieces like the famous *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (*A Little Night Music*) heard here. Most of Mozart's serenades were written for a specific commission, or in a few cases, as gifts for his own friends—but the reason he wrote this work remains a mystery. He was busily engaged with the opera *Don Giovanni* at the time and must have had a reason to interrupt his work for the time it took to write the serenade (though probably just a few days, given Mozart's typically furious speed of composition). It is not known whether the piece was ever performed during Mozart's lifetime, or indeed if it was played before it was finally published around 1827. A final mystery concerns the work's missing *Menuet*. Mozart kept a fairly meticulous running list of his own compositions, and his entry for August 10, 1787 lists "*Eine kleine Nacht Musik, consisting of an Allegro, Menuet and Trio, Romanze, Menuet and Trio, and Finale.*" However, at some point, someone removed the first *Menuet and Trio* from the manuscript. (A few modern performances include a movement reconstructed from one possible candidate for the missing *Menuet* suggested by Mozart's biographer Alfred Einstein, but this is not generally accepted as authentic, and nearly all performances today are in four movements.) What is left, however, is a jewel of a work: essentially a compact little symphony for strings. All these mysteries aside, Mozart's final serenade is today one of his most enduringly popular works.

The opening *Allegro* is set in sonata form and has two main sets of ideas: the first a bold fanfare-like figure and the second a more lilting idea with a chirpy conclusion. After treating these themes in a miniature development that begins abruptly in the minor and contains several surprising harmonic twists, the movement ends with a recapitulation and a brisk coda. The *Romanza* that follows is one of Mozart's typically lovely slow movements, laying out a pair of gentle and relaxed main themes. These alternate with a pair of contrasting episodes, one dancelike and the other slightly agitated. The main theme of the *Menuet* is more folksy than usual for this courtly dance, with some similarities to the popular "German Dance" that was all the rage in Vienna's dance halls in the 1780s. The central trio also sounds like peasant fiddling. Mozart rounds out *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* with a brisk rondo-form finale (*Allegro*). The main theme is an energetic idea heard at the beginning. In the course of the movement, he presents contrasting music but always finds witty ways to work back to this main idea.



Béla Bartók (1881-1945) spent much of his early career as a folksong collector, travelling the back roads of Rumania, Transylvania, and his native Hungary with primitive recording equipment and music manuscript paper, often working with his friend and colleague Zoltán Kodály. Bartók and Kodály both published editions and books based on their research, and in both cases

the music they collected had a profound influence on their own compositions. In the years before and during the first world war, Bartók published dozens of songs and piano pieces—the latter mostly intended for piano students—based on folk material. The concentrated little suite known as the *Romanian Folk Dances* was published in 1915 for piano, but he had collected most of the tunes upon which it was based in 1910 and 1912, during visits to Romanian communities living in Eastern Hungary. In the hyper-nationalistic period at the beginning of World War I, Bartók and Kodály were drafted by the Hungarian government to continue their collecting as a patriotic duty, collecting songs from Hungarian soldiers. Bartók’s interests were broader, however and he continued to publish and arrange music from across eastern Europe, sometimes raising the ire of Hungarian nationalists. When he published the *Romanian Folk Dances* he was bitterly attacked by critics in Budapest for “abandoning the music of Hungary.” These sour notes aside, this set of vivacious musical miniatures remains one of Bartók’s most popular early works. In 1917, he produced a version for a small “salon” orchestra, and a few years later, the Czech composer Arthur Willner arranged the version for string orchestra heard here.

This orchestral version is a suite of seven short dances: some of them lasting well under a minute. *Jocul cu bata* (*Dance with sticks*) is a strident Transylvanian dance tune with strongly accented rhythms. *Braul* (Sash dance) is a quirky dance begun by the viola, and picked up by the entire ensemble. *Pe loc* means “In one spot”—an intricate stamping dance done in place: here carried by solo violin above a mysterious drone, before coming to an inconclusive end. *Buciumeana* (*Horn dance*) is a more lyrical Transylvanian melody that passes from a solo line to the entire ensemble. *Poarga Romaneasca* (*Romanian Polka*) is a vigorous tune that

accompanies a traditional children’s game—a much more rhythmically intricate affair than the more familiar German and Polish polkas. This leads seamlessly into the final two dances, a pair of tiny movements titled *Maruntel (Quick dance)*. The music moves continually faster until a seemingly exhausted collapse.

“I think of myself, and have been described as, a poet-composer. I sculpt my music akin to how poets create, refine, and polish their poems.” – Augusta Read Thomas

One of America’s leading composers, Chicago-based **Augusta Read Thomas (b. 1964)** was born in New York City, and has long served as a professor of composition at the University of Chicago. She has served as composer-in-residence for several American orchestras, including a remarkable ten-season (1997-2006) residency with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, under both Daniel Barenboim, and Pierre Boulez.

In surveying several of Thomas’s works, I was astonished by their variety: each work essentially creates a new musical world that springs from the circumstance or subject matter, rather than a singular “Thomas style.” Her *Of Paradise and Light* was commissioned by conductor Gerard Schwarz for the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and was premiered by them on September 8, 2010. The work is a reworking of her 2008 setting for girls’ chorus of the poem *up into the silence*, published in 1939 by e. e. cummings:

up into the silence the green
silence with a white earth in it

you will (kiss me) go

out into the morning the young
morning with a warm world in it

(kiss me) you will go



on into the sunlight the fine sunlight
with a firm day in it you will go (kiss me

down into your memory and
a memory and memory

i) kiss me (will go)

Thomas refers to *Of Paradise and Light* as a “song without voices,” though one in which the repeated refrain (*kiss me*) of the enigmatic original poem still has an impact. Setting aside the usual double basses in scoring the work, gives it a treble-dominated tone color that reflects upward-reaching title. It is set in a very simple texture throughout, proceeding in short phrases and poignant pauses—according to Thomas, “There’s no ‘makeup’ in this piece; it’s all just pure heart.” This five-minute work moves in a gentle arch towards a subtle climax. (It has been rightly compared to Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*.)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was a phenomenally talented child prodigy—his mother made much of the fact that he was born of the feast-day of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music and musicians. Born in the English coastal village of Lowestoft, he had piano and viola lessons as a child and travelled to London for composition lessons at the Royal College of Music and with Frank Bridge. Britten was composing prolifically by the time he was in his teens—he had written over a hundred pieces by age 14. In 1930, he won a scholarship to the RCM and was deeply impressed by the music he heard in London, including his first encounters with the music of Mahler, and modernist and neoclassical works by Schoenberg and Stravinsky. After leaving the RCM in 1933, Britten received a travel grant, which he intended to use to travel to Vienna to study with the modernist twelve-tone composer Alban Berg. When his teachers and family discouraged him from working with Berg, Britten instead spent



the next several months at home in Lowestoft and produced the most un-Berg-like work imaginable, the *Simple Symphony* for string orchestra. While he was relaxing in his parents' seaside home, he apparently looked through some of the copious piles of music he had written as a child. The published score of the *Simple Symphony* notes that it is “entirely based upon material from works the composer wrote between the ages of nine and twelve. Although the development of these themes is in many places quite new, there are large stretches of the work which are taken bodily from the early pieces—save for the re-scoring for strings.” The piece is delightfully innocent—a kind of fond farewell to childhood memories—but it also shows a sophisticated young composer looking back with a certain degree of wistfulness and wit.

Two of Britten's childlike (but never childish) melodies appear in each movement. The *Boisterous Bourrée* begins with a fugal Baroque-style dance that nevertheless contains several quirky rhythmic twists. The brief contrasting music includes a much more lyrical theme, but the movement ends with a reprise of the opening dance and a wry, tongue-in-cheek ending. The second movement lives up to its name, *Playful Pizzicato*. This music was drawn from a piano *Scherzo* Britten had composed at age 11, and alternates a pair of light-footed themes. The longest movement, *Sentimental Sarabande* returns to the pseudo-Baroque approach of the first movement: its languid main theme is a soulful take on the most sensuous of Baroque dances. Britten contrasts this sarabande with a much more Romantic waltz. After a briefly strident episode, the sarabande returns to round off the movement. The *Frolicsome Finale* begins very much like the finale of a Haydn or Mozart symphony, with a blustery opening, but the main theme sounds much like a Hungarian dance by Britten's childhood hero Johannes Brahms. The lovely second theme was drawn from a song Britten composed in 1925. Britten works these themes out in a miniature development and recapitulation before ending the symphony with a lively coda.

PETER BAY conductor



Peter Bay became Music Director and Conductor of the Austin Symphony Orchestra in 1998 and Conductor of the Arizona Philharmonic in 2018.

Maestro Bay has appeared with over eighty different orchestras including the National, Chicago, St. Louis, Houston, Dallas, Baltimore, New Jersey, North

Carolina, San Antonio, Tucson, West Virginia, Colorado, Hawaii, Sarasota, Fort Worth, Bochum (Germany), Carinthian (Austria), Lithuanian National, and Ecuador National Symphonies, the Minnesota and Algarve (Portugal) Orchestras, the Louisiana, Buffalo, Rhode Island and Boca del Rio (Mexico) Philharmonics, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Eastman (*Postcard from Morocco*) and Aspen (*The Ballad of Baby Doe*) Opera Theaters, and the Theater Chamber Players of the Kennedy Center. Summer music festival appearances have included Aspen and Music in the Mountains (CO), Grant Park and Ravinia (IL), Round Top (TX), OK Mozart (OK), Mostly Modern (NY), Bowdoin (ME), and Skaneateles (NY). In June 2018 he led fully staged performances of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* as part of the Bernstein100Austin celebration.

Peter is the primary conductor for Ballet Austin. For Austin Opera he has conducted *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *La Traviata*, *Turandot*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *La Bohème*.

Other positions held by Bay have included Music Director of the Erie Philharmonic, Annapolis Symphony Orchestra, Breckenridge Music Festival (CO), Britt Festival Orchestra (OR), Bravo! Big Sky Classical Festival (MT), Hot Springs Music Festival (AR), and posts with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and Richmond Symphony. Bay and the ASO with pianist Anton Nel released a critically acclaimed Bridge CD of Edward Burlingame Hill's music. With the Richmond Symphony he recorded the U.S. premiere of Britten's *The Sword in the Stone* for Opus One Records, and with the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra *Voices*, featuring the percussion ensemble NEXUS. He is

conductor for Christopher Cross' *Secret Ladder* album and Hanan Townshend's soundtrack to the 2016 movie *The Vessel*.

In 1994, he was one of two conductors selected to participate in the Leonard Bernstein American Conductors Program. He was the first prize winner of the 1980 Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Young Conductors Competition and a prize winner of the 1987 Leopold Stokowski Competition sponsored by the American Symphony Orchestra. In July 2012 and January 2020, he appeared in *Solo Symphony*, a choreographic work created for him by Allison Orr of Forklift Danceworks, and was inducted into the Austin Arts Hall of Fame in May 2016.

Peter is married to soprano Mela Sarajane Dailey, and they have a son Colin.

PROGRAM

JAVIER ÁLVAREZ *Metro Chabacano*

SAMUEL BARBER *Adagio for Strings*

W. A. MOZART *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*

Allegro
Romanza
Menuet
Allegro

BÉLA BARTÓK *Romanian Folk Dances (arr. Arthur Willner)*

Jocul cu bata
Braul
Pe loc
Buciumeana
Poarga Românească
Maruntel
Maruntel

INTERMISSION

AUGUSTA READ THOMAS *Of Paradise and Light*

BENJAMIN BRITTEN *Simple Symphony*

Boisterous Bourrée
Playful Pizzicato
Sentimental Sarabande
Frolicsome Finale

Arizona Philharmonic Musicians

Violin I

Luke Hill, *Concertmaster*
Sarah Schreffler, *Assistant Concertmaster*
Kylie Ahern
Susan Dunn
Dasom Jeon
Grace Nakano
Luke Stikeleather

Violin II

Louis Coste, *Principal*
Branan Harrison
Emma Hill
Elizabeth Jones
Jamie Wu
Danny Yang

Viola

Esteban Hernandez Parra, *Principal*
Ana Katherine Dominguez Alvarado
Bryn Cannon
Rick Knous
Christine Kowalski

Cello

Wesley Skinner, *Principal* - Sponsored by Barbara Metz and Mark Schufletowski
Barbara Metz
Mary Nebel
Caecilia Peter

Contrabass

Wan-Ting Yu, *Principal*
Siqing Zhang
Sila Kuvanci