

The Bostonians

The Atlanta Chamber Players have fashioned an All-American program based on composers far north of the Mason-Dixon line.

by Edward Reichel

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's

AMERICAN MASTERPIECES:
CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The March and April calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 12. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.

Most Americans who love classical music could easily come up with a lengthy list of favorite composers. But they would be stumped if they had to narrow it down and just name Americans. Aaron Copland and Samuel Barber would readily come to mind, as would no doubt George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein. But beyond these few, Americans don't really know a lot about their own music.

That's where the National Endowment for the Arts' *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* comes in. Begun about three years ago, the initiative has helped bring many works from the late 19th and early 20th centuries out of history books and into the concert hall and has also provided another outlet for a number of today's composers.

The Atlanta Chamber Players' 2009 *American Masterpieces* project fit neatly into what the ensemble has always been dedicated to. "We've always been keenly committed to American music," says Paula Peace, the ensemble's founder, director and pianist. "It's great to have this focus." The ensemble used the funds they were awarded to develop several different programs that they've either already played in the Atlanta area or will take on the road with them shortly. The programs have included works by John Harbison, Jennifer Higdon, Ned Rorem and the premiere of a piece by Michael Gandolfi. "We had artistic freedom in choosing what we wanted to play," Peace says. "They [the NEA] really weren't looking for world premieres. They were interested in promoting American music." But they also got a brand-new work in the bargain.

This convergence between the aim of the grant and the central role American music plays in the Atlanta Chamber Players' repertoire benefited Gandolfi, whose *Canzona Nova: A Fractured Fairy Tale* was commissioned by the group and premiered in Atlanta late last year. Peace describes the 15-minute-long work as a 21st-century take on 16th-century technique. "Michael was studying 16th-century canzone and used that as the model for this piece." Written in one movement, the work is scored for oboe, string trio and piano and employs the lively rhythms and contrapuntal treatment of the material, with overlapping cadences found in Renaissance music. But Gandolfi also adds a distinctly American twist. "There is a kinship with Dixieland, because several tunes are heard together, just like you would find in Dixieland music," Peace says.

The Atlanta Chamber Players will be taking *Canzona Nova* with them when they play in Boston's Jordan Hall and New York's Weill Recital Hall the first week in April. The



ATLANTA CHAMBER PLAYERS

program they've planned for these two concerts is called *American Milestones* and also includes John Harbison's *Songs America Loves to Sing*, for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano, and Arthur Foote's Piano Quartet in C major, op. 23. "It's really a great program," Peace says. "It's all-American and all-Bostonian."

She describes Harbison's work, a 2004 co-commission with the Da Capo Chamber Players, as a "cool piece. He takes 10 American songs and uses them as inspiration." "Amazing Grace," "Aura Lee," "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "We Shall Overcome" are a few of the well-known tunes that Harbison has incorporated into the work, and each of the brief movements is either a solo or a canon. Says Peace: "It's an interesting concept, and it works."

While Harbison and Gandolfi are well-known composers whose music is played and recorded, that isn't the case with Foote. As with so many American composers who were active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Foote is neglected today, although that in no way reflects on the quality or integrity of his works. His music ranks right up there with that of the best composers that Europe produced. At least that's Peace's opinion of Foote's C-major Piano Quartet. "If it were better known, it would be a staple," she says. "It's impressively crafted and has symphonic qualities."

Peace even goes so far as to say that she finds Foote's Piano Quartet more interesting than Robert Schumann's: "That's shocking, I know. The Schumann is a masterpiece, but it's uneven. It has two really strong and two really medium movements. Foote's quartet has four very strong movements. It's a very mature and very well written work."

Foote, who lived from 1853 to 1937, has the distinction of being the first American composer in history to receive his entire musical training in the United States. He studied with John Knowles Paine at Harvard and was awarded this country's first master's degree in music. "He is a real blue-blood American composer," Peace says. Foote was part of a group of composers who lived in and around Boston and sought to forge a style that went

into new directions. Their intention was to create music that was distinctly American and free from European influences. Besides Foote and Paine, this group also included Amy Macy Beach, George Whitefield Chadwick, Edward MacDowell and Horatio Parker. They were known as the Boston Six, or the Second New England School. (The First New England School is a term loosely used for several American composers who lived and worked in the mid-18th century and included William Billings, Daniel Read, Oliver Holden

and several others.) While the Boston Six didn't see themselves as a tightly knit organization, their aesthetics and philosophy influenced later generations of American composers. Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, William Schuman and even Leonard Bernstein can claim to be their progeny.

Part of the NEA grant that the Atlanta Chamber Players were awarded will go towards "informances" at several colleges in Georgia, where the ensemble will discuss and perform a number of American works. "This is something we love to do," Peace said, adding that the group is heavily involved in outreach programs. "At our informances we present a formal introduction to the music and then play it." This spring the ensemble will visit three Atlanta-area campuses: Spelman College, the country's largest African-American institution of higher education, Kennesaw State University, and Georgia State University.

The 2010–2011 season marks the Atlanta Chamber Players' 35th anniversary. Right from the start they saw the need to focus a large part of what they did to American composers. Their first concert featured the music of George Crumb, and American music has been at the center of what they've been doing ever since. But they've never ignored the old warhorses of the repertoire, either. "We've been committed to variety," Peace said. "We play old works and brand-new repertoire." And she's optimistic that pieces such as those by Harbison and Gandolfi that they'll be playing at their upcoming concerts will stand the test of time. "We like to call them 21st-century classics."

Edward Reichel, who holds a doctorate in composition from the University of California at Santa Barbara, is the former music critic of the Deseret News (Salt Lake City). He is the founder of and chief writer for two online classical music journals, www.ReichelRecommends.com and www.ReichelArtsReview.com.

NEA



AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES

CHAMBER
MUSIC

Performances in March & April

MARCH 2 Muncie, IN

ENSEMBLE **Ball State Musical Arts Quintet** PROGRAM Cage, Music for Wind Instruments; Fine, Partita; Maslanka, Quintet No. 4; Rochberg, *To the Dark Wood*; Miniatures; Stucky, Serenade ARTISTS Mihoko Watanabe, flute; Johanna Cox, oboe; Elizabeth Crawford, clarinet; Gene Berger, horn; Keith Sweger; bassoon <http://cms.bsu.edu/About>

MARCH 6 Detroit, MI

Cathedral of Saint Paul
ENSEMBLE **Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings** PROGRAM Bolcom, *A Haunted Labyrinth* ARTISTS Detroit Chamber Winds and Robert Conway, piano www.detroitchamberwinds.org

MARCH 6 San Francisco, CA

ENSEMBLE **San Francisco Contemporary Music Players** PROGRAM Du Yun, *Vicissitudes, No. 1* ARTISTS The Ligeti Horn Trio and members of the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players www.sfcmp.org

MARCH 18 New York, NY

Church of St. Luke in the Fields
ENSEMBLE **The Western Wind** PROGRAM *The Happy Journey*: Diverse American vocal music, including New England anthems and folk hymns; Shaker songs; Southern spirituals; 19th-century parlor songs; new music and pop and jazz arrangements. Ensemble Singing workshop on March 19. www.westernwind.org

MARCH 19 Houston, TX

PRESENTER **Da Camera of Houston** PROGRAM Geri Allen Trio with Gary Bartz, saxophone www.dacamera.com

MARCH 20 Carmel, IN

ENSEMBLE **Ball State Musical Arts Quintet**
PROGRAM AND ARTISTS See entry for March 2, above. <http://cms.bsu.edu/About>

MARCH 26 Los Angeles, CA

Colburn School
ENSEMBLE **Southwest Chamber Music** PROGRAM *John Cage Festival: Thirteen, Sixteen Dances, 4'33"* ARTISTS Conducted by Jeff von der Schmidt www.swcm.org

MARCH 28 Elkhart, IN

ENSEMBLE **Ball State Musical Arts Quintet**
PROGRAM AND ARTISTS See entry for March 2, above. <http://cms.bsu.edu/About>

MARCH 31 New York, NY

ENSEMBLE **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**
PROGRAM Shields, *Tenebrae*, for Harp and String Quartet
ARTISTS Bridget Kibbey, harp; Jupiter String Quartet (Nelson Lee, Meg Freivogel, violins; Liz Freivogel, viola; Daniel McDonough, cello) www.chambermusicsociety.org

APRIL 3 Muncie, IN

ENSEMBLE **Ball State Musical Arts Quintet**
PROGRAM AND ARTISTS See entry for March 2. <http://cms.bsu.edu/About>

APRIL 7-10 St. Paul, MN

Studio Z
ENSEMBLE/PRESENTER **Zeitgeist** PROGRAM *Zeitgeist's Early Music Festival*: Henry Cowell (performances, discussion, exhibits, and exploration) artists Members of the ensemble and student and community musicians to be named later. <http://zeitgeistnewmusic.org>

APRIL 7 Boston, MA

Jordan Hall
ENSEMBLE **Atlanta Chamber Players** PROGRAM *American Milestones*: Gandolfi, *Canzona Nova: A Fractured Fairy Tale* for oboe, string trio, and piano; Harbison, *Songs America Loves to Sing* (for flute/piccolo, clarinet, piano, violin and cello); Foote, Piano Quartet ARTISTS Paula Peace, piano; Christina Smith, flute; Laura Ardan, clarinet; Elizabeth Koch, oboe; Justin Bruns, violin; Catherine Lynn, viola; Brad Ritchie, cello www.atlantachamberplayers.com

APRIL 8 Los Angeles, CA

Armory Center for the Arts
ENSEMBLE **Southwest Chamber Music** PROGRAM *John Cage Festival: Child of Tree, Variations I, Branches*.
FEATURED ARTIST Lynn Vartan, percussion www.swcm.org

APRIL 8 Denton, TX

PRESENTER **University of North Texas** PROGRAM *Survey of American Chamber Music, Part 3* music.unt.edu

APRIL 9 New York, NY

Weill Recital Hall
ENSEMBLE **Atlanta Chamber Players** PROGRAM *American Milestones* PROGRAM AND ARTISTS See April 7 entry, above, for details. www.atlantachamberplayers.com

APRIL 9 Saint Cloud, MN

Calvary Community Church
PRESENTER **Chamber Music Society of Saint Cloud**
PROGRAM Crumb, *Black Angels*; Barber, String Quartet, Op. 11; Ives, String Quartet No. 1 ("A Revival Service")
ARTISTS Miró Quartet (Daniel Ching and Sandy Yamamoto, violins; John Largess, viola; Joshua Gindele, cello) www.chambermusicstcloud.org

APRIL 9 Los Angeles, CA

Armory Center for the Arts
ENSEMBLE **Southwest Chamber Music** PROGRAM *John Cage Festival: Six Melodies for Violin & Piano, Seven Haiku for Piano, Thirteen Harmonies from Apartment House 1776* FEATURED ARTISTS Lorenz Gamma, violin; Ming Tsu, piano www.swcm.org

APRIL 10 New York, NY

Alice Tully Hall
ENSEMBLE **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**
PROGRAM Auerbach, Sextet for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Two Cellos ARTISTS Yura Lee, Erin Keefe, violins; Paul Neubauer, Beth Guterman, violas; Fred Sherry, Nicolas Aldstaedt, cellos www.chambermusicsociety.org

APRIL 10 Los Angeles, CA

Armory Center for the Arts
ENSEMBLE **Southwest Chamber Music** PROGRAM *John Cage Festival: One's, Ryoanji Cheap Imitation, But What About the Noise of Crumbling Paper?* ARTISTS Lynn Vartan, percussion; Tom Peters, double bass; Shalini Vijayan, violin www.swcm.org

APRIL 12 New York, NY

Alice Tully Hall
ENSEMBLE **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**
PROGRAM Auerbach, Sextet for Two Violins, Two Violas, and Two Cellos ARTISTS (See April 10 entry.) www.chambermusicsociety.org

APRIL 18 Houston, TX

PRESENTER **Da Camera of Houston** ARTISTS supergroup WATTS, with drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts, trumpeter Nicholas Payton; saxophonist David Sánchez; and bassist Christian McBride www.dacamera.com

APRIL 22 Seymour, IN

ENSEMBLE **Ball State Musical Arts Quintet**
PROGRAM AND ARTISTS (See entry for March 2.) <http://cms.bsu.edu/About>

APRIL 29 New York, NY

ENSEMBLE **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center**
PROGRAM *Selections from Six American Songbooks*, for baritone, piano, and percussion, by George Crumb, Tan Dun, *Elegy: Snow in June*, for cello and four percussion www.chambermusicsociety.org