

American Festivals, a symphonic oratorio
Music by Nolan Gasser
Texts by Robert Trent Jones, Jr.

Program Notes

American Festivals is a four-movement symphonic oratorio dedicated to our most unique and defining national holidays: July 4th, Memorial Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Thanksgiving. Each movement is set for full orchestra, chorus, and soloists, and the entire oratorio is about an hour in length. To date, the opening three movements have been successfully premiered: “Oration on July 4th” at the 2004 Spoleto Festival by the Charleston Symphony, with actor Sam Waterston as orator; “Black Suit Blues” in February 2005 by the Memphis Symphony, during a city-sponsored tribute concert for Martin Luther King, Jr. (and since repeated by the Oakland Symphony in January 2007); and “Memorial Day” in May 2006 by the Arkansas Symphony, where it was introduced by General Wesley Clark. This constitutes the world premiere of “Thanksgiving”, and the first performance of the oratorio in its entirety. *American Festivals* offers its listeners a fresh, provocative, and artistic reflection of our nation – its values, its history, and its bounties – and an inspirational call for all of us to look deeper into ourselves as Americans. A musical- textual synopsis of each movement is as follows:

Oration on July 4th, for orchestra, chorus, and orator

The *Oration on July 4th* is a musical setting of a provocative discourse on the nature of liberty as well as our past and present responsibilities to its continued survival. The movement begins with an extensive orchestral fanfare whose climax gives way to the opening stanza of the poem (*exordium*: “In Independence Hall...”) presented by the Chorus – which sets up the historical context of the oration proper by referencing our nation’s founding in Philadelphia, when “Our Declaration was signed and sealed”; this section features elaborate contrapuntal writing, and culminates in the symbolic pealing of the Liberty Bell (sounding at the actual historic pitch of Eb). The oration proper then proceeds (*narratio*) with the Orator delivering a series of historically based reflections, centered first upon our Founding Fathers (Franklin, Washington) and then upon the challenges faced by Lincoln and the nation during the Civil War; throughout this section, the provocative words of the Orator are echoed and embellished by the Chorus – providing a kind of exegetical commentary, much like a Greek Chorus. Following the dark tones accompanying the tragedies of the Civil War, the mood lightens (*confirmatio*), as the Orator returns to today and the light-hearted joys of celebrating our nation’s birthday, marked musically by a modified return of the fanfare-like material of the opening. At the same time, the Orator exhorts us “to question our leaders” and carry forth our own duties to maintain the dream of our nation. The work concludes (*peroratio*) with the Choral refrain “Keep it, a Republic! America, sweet land of Liberty!” and a final challenge to pledge ourselves anew “to our everlasting liberty.” Among the special techniques used in the work is a modified approach to the Renaissance mensuration canon – which, when combined with an Ivesian use of multi-song quotation, is designed to musically depict the battle of North and South during the Civil War.

Memorial Day, for orchestra, chorus, mezzo-soprano, and bagpipes

“Memorial Day” is a musical setting of a poem dedicated to our fallen soldiers, though likewise to all those who stand in harm’s way to protect our liberties. Following his interpretation of Mr. Jones’ poem, Dr. Gasser adopted a rather programmatic approach in setting the music. His reading is that the poem presents a narrative account of a military funeral service, where the principal voice is that of a mother of a fallen young soldier – struggling with the paradoxical emotions of grief and pride that underscore her son’s sacrifice. A general sequence of symbolic

events and perceptions, as incorporated into the musical setting, is as follows: reflections as the casket is brought to the chapel; personal struggle as the mother views the casket in the chapel; burial scene, complete with full military honors; a series of imagined perceptions following the service – an “angel eagle” (solo violin) escorting her son’s soul (solo trumpet) to heaven, a chorus of fallen soldiers’ souls exhorting the living to honor their sacrifice, the living community then abiding with words of praise and admiration; following these perceptions, the mother is inspired to move beyond her grief to embrace her son’s sacrifice with pride, to sing in praise of all those who “honor Liberty’s endless call”, first alone and then with the entire community – thereby reminding us of our duty to do likewise.

Black Suit Blues, for orchestra, chorus, baritone, and tenor saxophone

Black Suit Blues is a musical setting of a poem that reflects Mr. Jones’ personal memory of the great movement and events of the 1960s - events he experienced during numerous visits to the South – including in the immediate aftermath of Dr. King’s assassination; the poem embodies Mr. Jones’ visceral memory of the despair and uncertainty of those difficult times. In setting the text to music, Dr. Gasser fashioned the poem into a detailed storyline, creating for the work a narrative centered on the tremendous impact of the life and death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Throughout the work, the spirit of Dr. King is musically symbolized by the tenor saxophone – which at the beginning plays a cadenza and solo passage that include a text-less “setting” of several passages spoken by Dr. King during his final sermon, given at the Mason Temple in Memphis on the eve of his assassination. The final sentence of the sermon quotes the opening line of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” – which is here quoted literally in the saxophone. But just before the final word (“Lord”), a symbolic gunshot breaks off his voice, leading to an intense and dissonant passage – rife with “screams” in the Chorus and general chaos in the orchestra. The opening stanza of the poem is then performed by the chorus, and represents a kind of communal lament following news of the assassination. The second stanza is sung by the baritone, and represents the extreme despair of an individual member of the community following Dr. King’s assassination; here is a young black man consumed with grief, who now stands ready to abandon hope. As the movement continues, the urgings and quotations of Dr. King sung by the community (the chorus), as well as the spirit of Dr. King himself (the tenor saxophone), gradually transform the young man into a new leader of his community. The music throughout the movement is much influenced by gospel and related genres (field holler, etc.). Among other musical techniques include the use of a slow, sustained utterance of Dr. King’s name by the Chorus, following the returned despair of the baritone – which references somewhat the slow, fermata-held chords on the lines “Ex Maria Virgine” and “Jesu Christe” within a Renaissance Mass cycle.

Thanksgiving, for orchestra, chorus, orator, baritone, mezzo-soprano, and Native flute

Thanksgiving is a musical setting of a poem dedicated to the various images, sentiments, and ideals associated with this most joyful of our secular holidays, Thanksgiving: the beauty of our land, the blessing of being with family and friends, even the ubiquitous turkey. A critical element as well is the incorporation of the wisdom of our Native peoples, as embodied especially in the voice of the Clan Mother - who here represents not so much a physical woman as a spiritual presence, as the archetypal "mother of us all". In introducing the Native perspective, moreover, there is inevitably some reference to the historic "clash" between the Native peoples and the European settler, both positive and negative. Over all, however, the poem and music speak primarily of the joyful things that Thanksgiving signifies to all of us as Americans, while likewise reminding us of our obligations to preserve our natural treasures for future generations. The structure of the work, following the poetry, may be broadly defined as follows: Introduction; the Welcoming by the Clan Mother; the Turkey Music; the "Americana" section; the "Clash" of Cultures; the Joys of Thanksgiving; and Coda – wherein the principal themes of all four movements are presented in counterpoint.