



OMAHA
SYMPHONY

Program Notes

2026/27 SEASON

Bartók's Divertimento

Sunday, October 18 | 2:00 PM
The Joslyn

Lee Mills, Conductor | Sonya Headlam, Soprano

HENRI FRÉDIEN TOMASI

Fanfares liturgiques

I. Annonciation

II. Evangile

III. Apocalypse (Scherzo)

IV. Procession du Vendredi-saint

BÉLA BARTÓK

Divertimento

I. Allegro non troppo

II. Molto adagio

III. Allegro assai

Intermission

HEITOR VILLA-LOBOS

Bachianas brasileiras No.9

I. Prelúdio: Vagaroso e místico

II. Fuga: Poco apressado

SAMUEL BARBER

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Sonya Headlam, Soprano



This printed program is a condensed version.

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Featured Artists



LEE MILLS

Five-time winner of the Solti Foundation U.S. Career Assistance Award, **Lee Mills** is internationally recognized as a passionate, multifaceted and energetic conductor. In naming Mills as the “New Artist of the Month” for March 2022, *Musical America* praised Mills’ “omnivorous musical temperament eager to try out highly contrasting musical styles and approaches.”

Mills is currently the Music Director of the Greenville Symphony Orchestra in South Carolina, a post he started in the 2024-2025 season, and he is Executive Director of the Palm Springs Friends of Philharmonic in California. During the pandemic, Mills was an invaluable asset to the Seattle Symphony, giving dozens of performances, including the 2020 Season Opening Gala, and recording multiple albums with the orchestra. Mills also was the “hero of the hour” (*Seattle Times*) when he stepped in at the last minute to replace Thomas Dausgaard for a performance of Hanna Lash’s world premiere double-harp concerto *The Peril of Dreams* and Amy Beach’s epic *Gaelic Symphony* in

November 2021, about which Thomas May wrote in *Musical America*, “Mills emerged in his element here, showing an obvious fondness for this epic, unjustifiably neglected score. Along with a compelling dramatic arc, he elicited characterful playing for the many solos that enrich it.”

In the fall of 2022, Mills was the Solti Foundation U.S. Resident at Lyric Opera of Chicago, where he worked with maestro Enrique Mazzola on Verdi’s *Don Carlos*. The League of American Orchestras selected Mills for the 2018 Bruno Walter National Conductors Preview where he conducted the Nashville Symphony Orchestra, and in 2017 Mills was selected as a semi-finalist in the Sir Georg Solti International Conducting Competition and the Opera Royal de Wallonie-Liege International Opera Conducting Competitions. In addition, he conducted alongside David Robertson in the U.S. Premiere of John Cage’s *Thirty Pieces for Five Orchestras* with the Saint Louis Symphony.

Mills is an active guest conductor and has led concerts with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, National Symphony Orchestra (USA), Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Colorado Symphony, and São Paulo State Symphony Orchestra, among many others.

Through his project Vibe Sinfônica, Mills has brought classical music to thousands of new listeners; at their inaugural performance, Vibe Sinfônica performed music of Vivaldi at The Week Group’s 14th anniversary in São Paulo, playing to a crowd of over 10,000. This project was also featured in a video clip of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, created to commemorate the 15th anniversary of The Week.

At the invitation of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Music Director Marin Alsop, he received the prestigious BSO-Peabody Institute Conducting Fellowship in 2011. Under the tutelage of Gustav Meier and Marin Alsop, Mills received his Graduate Performance Diploma and Artist’s Diploma in Orchestral Conducting at the Peabody Institute. He was a conducting fellow at the American Academy of Conducting at Aspen, working closely with Larry Rachleff, Robert Spano and Hugh Wolff. Mr. Mills graduated cum laude from Whitman College, where he studied with Robert Bode.



SONYA HEADLAM

Soprano Sonya Headlam performs repertoire ranging from early music to newly composed works, bringing scholarly curiosity and a deeply communicative approach across opera, oratorio, art song, and chamber music.

She is frequently heard in large-scale sacred and symphonic works with leading ensembles, including the New York Philharmonic, Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Canada’s National Arts Centre Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, North Carolina Symphony, New World Symphony, and the Hallé Orchestra, with whom she made her UK debut in 2025. She collaborates regularly with Apollo’s Fire and Trinity Choir, the Grammy-nominated New York City-based professional ensemble.

Headlam is a committed interpreter of contemporary music, with notable performances of Julia Wolfe’s *Steel Hammer* at Carnegie Hall, Steve Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians* with the Bang on a Can All-Stars at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Ellen Reid’s *dreams of the new world* at the Prototype Festival, and Tyshawn Sorey’s *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)* at the Park Avenue Armory.

Her artistic work includes a long-standing engagement with the music of Ignatius Sancho, the 18th-century Black British composer, writer, and abolitionist. She earned her Doctor of Musical Arts from Rutgers University, where she later returned as a visiting scholar to continue her research on Sancho’s life and music. She appears as the featured soprano on Sancho: *Music of an 18th-Century Black Englishman* (Centaur, 2025), a Raritan Players recording that explores Sancho’s vocal and instrumental music. Additional recordings include the Raritan Players’ *In the Salon of Madame Brillon* (Acis, 2023) and a forthcoming world-premiere recording of Trevor Weston’s *Reflections*.

Program Notes

by Mathew Fuerst

Fanfare Liturgiques

Henri Tomasi

Born: August 17, 1901 – Marseille, France

Died: January 13, 1971 – Paris, France

Piece Length: Approximately 20 minutes.

Henri Tomasi was a French composer and conductor active in the first half of the twentieth century. He won the coveted Prix de Rome twice, as well as prizes for his work on the podium. A prolific composer who worked in all genres, Tomasi set Oscar Milosz's play *Miguel Mañara. Mystère en six tableaux* (*Miguel Mañara. Mystery in six scenes*) to music for an opera. The *Fanfare Liturgiques* are four movements that Tomasi extracted from that work, written for a hefty barrage of brass and percussion. The function as a fantastic capsulation of the opera, which follows the story of Miguel Mañara (1627-1679), a protagonist with an early life so wild he's thought to be the inspiration for the archetypal Don Juan. Contrary to the Don, Miguel experienced a spiritual awakening following the death of his beloved wife. He mourned for five to six months in a monastery, and historians believe this period was when he decided to devote his life to helping the poor and sick. Ultimately, Mañara would help found the Hospital de la Caridad in Spain, a charity hospital still operating today.

Divertimento

Béla Bartók

Born: March 25, 1881 – Sânnicolau Mare, Romania

Died: September 26, 1945 – New York, NY

Piece Length: Approximately 25 minutes.

Paul Sacher, one of the most influential supporters of new music in the twentieth century, was responsible for commissioning and premiering a number of works commonly considered masterpieces. These included Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, Igor Stravinsky's Concerto in D, and three works by Bela Bartók: *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*, the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, and the Divertimento for String Orchestra featured today.

A "divertimento" is a musical genre most commonly found in the eighteenth century. They are generally lighter works; in fact, the word comes from the Italian "*divertire*" which means "to amuse." One famous divertimento, and a wonderful example of the genre, is Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. While the title might suggest lighter music, Bartók's Divertimento is anything but. Written quickly over fifteen days in August 1939 at the Chalet Aellen in Saanen (Bern, Switzerland), Bartók's Divertimento was the last composition he composed in Europe before fleeing Hungary and emigrating to the United States at the start of World War II. By this point in time, he was open about his contempt for the Nazi regime, making his situation in Hungary difficult as the country edged closer to joining the Axis Powers. They would eventually do so in 1940.

Bartók's work masterfully blends Western classical and Hungarian folk traditions and is often referred to as "neo-classical" – a contemporary work using previous era techniques and structures. It fluctuates between ebullient optimism, the eerie wandering of night and the time's inherent darkness, and the riotous joy imbedded within the music of his home and his heart.

Bachianas Brasileiras No. 9

Heitor Villa-Lobos

Born: March 5, 1887 – Rio de Janeiro, Empire of Brazil

Died: November 17, 1959 – Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Piece Length: Approximately 10 minutes.

Heitor Villa-Lobos was a composer and conductor who is regarded as one of the most significant artistic figures from Brazil. He wrote in every genre and produced a vast catalog of works. One can hear the blending of many influences in his distinctive compositions: Brazilian folk music, his interest in the Baroque, as well as compositional trends that were present in Paris in the 1920s, where he lived twice from 1923-24 and again from 1927-30.

Bachianas Brasileiras No. 9 Ext.

This is perhaps best exhibited in the nine suites Villa-Lobos composed between 1930 and 1945 called *Bachianas Brasileiras* (*Bach-Inspired Brazilian Pieces*). Each suite is written for different instruments, similar to Johann Sebastian Bach's Brandenburg Concertos - the third of which the Omaha Symphony will be performing on April 18! They are also each structured using common Baroque forms such as toccatas, arias, and fantasias.

The *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 9, originally written for chorus and later re-written for string orchestra, takes perhaps one of the most familiar Bach forms: the prelude and fugue. Villa-Lobos, however, opens with a jolt and twists the familiar forms into something brand new, creating a piece that holds your attention from the very beginning.

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

Samuel Barber

Born: March 9, 1920 – West Chester, PA

Died: January 23, 1981 – New York, NY

Piece Length: Approximately 15 minutes.

In 1947, the great American soprano Eleanor Steber commissioned Samuel Barber to compose an orchestral song. Barber chose a prose poem by James Agee that was published in 1938: "Knoxville: Summer of 1915." The poem is a semi-autobiographical depiction of a summer evening in 1915 with his family. The choice of year is significant: it would be the last year his family would be intact. His father would tragically die in an automobile accident the following year when Agee was just six years old. The prose poem Agee wrote would later be used as a preamble in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Death in the Family*. For the most part, the text is written through the eyes of a five-year-old child observing life around him, as the family lies in the grass outside one evening. For the most part, the poem's mood is nostalgic, although there are a few brief, philosophical moments in the text that perhaps foreshadow the tragic events that would occur the following year. After this contemplation, the poem ends with the child narrator (Agee) being taken to bed.

Perhaps what drew Barber to this text was the fact that he was dealing with the deteriorating health of his own beloved father. As Barber said during a radio interview in 1949, "[M]y musical response that summer of 1947 was immediate and intense." Indeed, the contemplation of death was not the only similarity between the two artists. They were also similar in age, and both came from artistic families.

The premiere of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* was on April 9, 1948, by the Boston Symphony, conducted by Serge Koussevitsky with Eleanor Steber as soloist. The premiere was overshadowed by the surprising announcement of Koussevitsky stepping down as conductor of the Boston Symphony. While Steber's performance was met with universal acclaim, Barber's composition produced a mixed reaction. Some applauded Barber's idyllic music, while others felt it fell flat. Agee, upon hearing the work, simply stated "Barber's music is self-sufficient." Over time, the composition would grow in stature, becoming one of Barber's most beloved works. In fact, years later Aaron Copland expressed his disappointment that he did not find the text first, though adding "It's just as well it happened the way it did, or we wouldn't have Sam's beautiful score."

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