

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

# Serenity

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## **AHMED ALABACA (1984- )**

### **ACROSS THE CALM WATERS OF HEAVEN – A PIECE FOR PEACE**

On Dec. 2, 2015, a married couple carried out a brazen attack at a holiday party in San Bernardino, Calif. Of the 80 people at the event, 14 were killed and 22 wounded before police pursued the suspects, who died in a shootout.

Like many people around the country, Ahmed Alabaca was shaken by the mass shooting, more so because it happened in his hometown. This was only one of many that would continue to occur around the country with alarming frequency – as if nothing could be done to stop the carnage.

Alabaca channeled his feelings into his art: music. A year later, he finished his score, *Across the Calm Waters of Heaven – A Piece for Peace*, which receives its TFO premiere this weekend under the baton of Music Director Michael Francis.

Alabaca has described the 11-minute work as an emotional journey that explores the nature of loss, grief and love. Although he wrote it following the shootings in San Bernardino, he says it transcends time and place, and took on a “bigger meaning” after the 2016 mass murder of 49 people at a nightclub in Orlando. It represents the victims of senseless acts of violence everywhere, but it also symbolizes hope.

“The piece begins by capturing the mixed feelings of loss and anticipation felt by the victims as they leave behind their bodies and their lives here on Earth and begin their ascension into the love and care of their new eternal home,” Alabaca explains. “The work flows forward, capturing the awe and joy felt by the arrivals to their new home, a place of peace, love and beauty.”

Midway through the work, a solo piano emerges from the strings, its plaintive melody suggesting a “calm lake” – a moment of reflection. The strings soon return, their soft contours slowly fading into quiet, leaving what Alabaca calls a sense of “peace, reassurance and healing to others.”

## **TOMASO ALBINONI (1671-1751)**

### **OBOE CONCERTO NO. 2, OP. 9**

Albinoni came from a privileged Venetian family of paper merchants, and his wealth allowed him to compose at leisure and without the pressure of deadlines. He was prolific, writing 100 sonatas, 55 operas and about 50 concertos. These works brought fame and the respect of his contemporary in Germany, Johann Sebastian Bach. But demand for his music faded, and sadly, dozens of Albinoni’s scores were lost during World War II, when Allied bombers destroyed the Dresden State Library.

For all his industry, Albinoni is best known today for the *Adagio in G Minor*, a melancholy piece for organ and

strings actually composed in 1945 by the Milanese musicologist Remo Giazotto, who borrowed a bass line and six bars of melody written by Albinoni. The work often appears on “Greatest Hits of the Baroque” recordings, garishly orchestrated – and incorrectly attributed to Albinoni.

More attention should be given to the composer’s woodwind concertos, particularly those for oboe. Albinoni loved the nasal, sinewy sound of this reed instrument, and composed two sets of concertos with accompanying strings, Op. 7 and Op. 9. The first set was so successful that in 1722 Albinoni launched into a second without blinking.

The best-known is *Concerto No. 2 in D Minor*, its two perky outer movements serving as bookends for a tranquil slow section that has become a favorite among oboists. Here, Albinoni is at his best, creating tender and lyrical phrases of abundant variety, all melding into the supporting body of strings. The soloist suspends each new line high above the other musicians, and lets it fall gently among them. Some might wonder if Mozart had heard this music, as it mirrors the lovely oboe and clarinet theme in his *Gran Partita* for winds, featured in the 1984 film *Amadeus*.

### **MAX RICHTER (1966- )** **ON THE NATURE OF DAYLIGHT**

Most of us don’t bring pillows to the concert hall, unless a work by Max Richter is on the program. That was part of the fun of his nocturnal opus of 2015, *Sleep*, where audiences were encouraged to do just that through much of its eight-hour length.

The German-born British composer and pianist considers himself a post-minimalist who isn’t afraid to take risks with ambient soundscapes. But where *Sleep* is more an exploration of mood, or possibly of the unconscious mind, *On the Nature of Daylight* is more of a protest song, inspired by the human consequences of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Like the Alabaca that began this program, Richter addresses, albeit abstractly, the nature of cruelty.

The piece has since transformed into an over-used cinema soundtrack, beginning with Martin Scorsese’s *Shutter Island* a decade ago. The music is effective as a film component because of its ability to “build tension, magnify emotion and push along a feeling of hopelessness,” notes Jamie Parmenter in *Vinyl Chapters*, an online music magazine.

The six-minute piece is not unlike Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* (also on this program) and even hints at Henryk Górecki’s *Third Symphony*, but with more of a monotone, organic sound. The lower strings open with a lament, followed by a high, fluttering motif from a solo violin. Soon, a second violin appears, offering a sweet, serene elegy from above. Textures intensify and the music sways back and forth before ending abruptly.

### **RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872-1958)** **VARIATIONS OF A THEME BY THOMAS TALLIS**

The music of England was quiescent throughout much the 19th century, when France, Germany, Russia, Spain and other European countries forged their identities. But England soon would wake from slumber and give the world a distinctive style based on its own deep-rooted traditions dating back to the late Middle Ages.

English music re-emerged through the works of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Holst, Delius, Britten, and a handful of others who revived England's long-dormant musical personality. Vaughan Williams, a large, sluggish man who finished nine symphonies before his death at age 85, was particularly interested in the heartbeat of his own country, and had little use for outside influences.

“As long as composers persist in serving up at a second hand the externals of the music of other nations,” he once said, “they must not be surprised if audiences prefer the real Brahms, Wagner, Debussy and Stravinsky to their pale reflections.”

Vaughan Williams loved the tradition of the English folk song and music evoking the landscape of his homeland. After earning a doctorate degree in music at Cambridge in 1901, he joined the English Folk Song Society, and immersed himself in simple tunes he found in villages and towns throughout England. This was to be a turning point for the composer, who said “the knowledge of our folk songs did not so much discover for us something new, but uncovered something which had been hidden by foreign matter.” Vaughan Williams supported his strident English view through such works as *On Wenlock Edge*, the popular *Fantasia on Greensleeves*, *the Lark Ascending*, and the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

The latter was written in 1910 for double string orchestra and based on a hymn by the eponymous Renaissance organist and composer. It would become one of Vaughan Williams' most popular works – lush, hushed, accessible, mysterious and exquisitely well crafted. The main theme is repeated three times, and the music grows from variations based on fragments of that theme. Like Tallis before him, Vaughan Williams wanted to complement the resonance of England's great cathedrals – in this case, Gloucester, where it received its first performance by the London Symphony Orchestra.

### **SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)** **ADAGIO FOR STRINGS**

Most anyone who has seen the 1986 Oliver Stone movie *Platoon* may remember the impassioned score that suggests, in a montage of slow motion, the existential horror of war. Stone borrowed for his Oscar-winning film one of the most popular of all American musical compositions, the *Adagio for Strings* by Samuel Barber, and his cinematic choice introduced a young generation to Barber's music.

Originally conceived as the slow movement for his lone *String Quartet* of 1936, the *Adagio* has resettled into a concert piece of its own. It would become the composer's most performed work, and played following the deaths of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Albert Einstein and Princess Grace of Monaco.

Barber said he tired of hearing it in concerts, even though it helped make his name at a time when American composers struggled to find a voice amid the wash of European repertoire. “They always play that piece,” he once grumbled during a radio interview. “I wish they'd play some of my other pieces.”

Listeners rarely grumble when they hear this poetically lyrical work, either for the first or hundredth time. It requires no understanding or preparation to enjoy. Some might call it romantic and old fashioned, but Barber defended his conservatism: “I myself wrote always as I wished, and without a tremendous desire to find the latest thing possible,” he said. “This takes a certain kind of courage.”

The music develops over a long arch in B-flat minor, its simple theme expanding in weight and sonority.

Essentially a nonstop crescendo of shifting suspensions, the music reaches a climax and releases its tension before the strings repeat the opening theme, then fade into silence. Listeners can decide for themselves if the *Adagio* is about some deep sadness or resignation, or just a moment of serenity that always sounds fresh.

***Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance arts writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.***