

America's Voice: Barbara Hannigan Conducts Ives, Ruggles and Gershwin

Thursday, April 8, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican
Barbara Hannigan, conductor · Barbara Hannigan, soprano

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	IVES 1874–1954 <i>At the River ('Shall We Gather at the River')</i>	4'
2	IVES 1874–1954 <i>From the Steeples and the Mountains</i>	5'
3	SEEGER 1901–1953 <i>Rissolty Rossolty</i>	5'
4	RIEGGER 1885–1961 <i>Study in Sonority, Op. 7</i>	7'
5	RUGGLES 1876–1971 <i>Sun-treader</i>	15'
6	RODGERS 1902–1979 <i>The Carousel Waltz (orch. Don Walker)</i>	8'
7	GERSHWIN 1898–1937 <i>Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture (arr. Robert Russell Bennett)</i>	24'
TOTAL MUSIC		68'

Charles Ives

1874–1954

At the River ('Shall We Gather at the River')

THE COMPOSER

Charles Edward Ives was born on October 20, 1874, in Danbury, Connecticut, into a musical household that would shape his revolutionary approach to composition. His father, George Ives, was a bandleader who encouraged his son to explore unconventional sounds, such as bitonal and polytonal harmonies, that anticipated the musical experiments of the twentieth century by decades.

4 minutes

Young Charles was a prodigy; at fourteen he was already working as a church organist. At Yale he studied composition with Horatio Parker, while also captaining the baseball team and playing varsity football. After graduation in 1898, Ives made a fateful decision: rather than struggle for recognition in the conservative musical establishment of his day, he would earn his living in insurance, composing in his free time. The firm he co-founded, Ives & Myrick, became extraordinarily successful, pioneering the concept of estate planning. Ives considered his business career a valuable human experience that enriched his music.

Working in obscurity, Ives developed a musical language that anticipated nearly every innovation of twentieth-century music: atonality, polyrhythm, spatial music, aleatory techniques. His works were largely unknown until late in his life. His Third Symphony finally received its premiere in 1946, decades after it was written, and the following year it won the Pulitzer Prize. Ives remains America's most original composer, a visionary who charted new paths that others would follow long after.

ABOUT THE WORK

'Shall We Gather at the River?' is one of the best-known American hymns. Robert Lowry, a Baptist minister in Brooklyn, wrote words and tune in 1864, and it was published the following year. Its picture of the saints meeting beside the river of life comes from the last chapter of the Book of Revelation.

Charles Ives grew up with hymns like this one in the churches and outdoor revival meetings of Connecticut, and they run through his music from first to last. He used Lowry's tune in the finale of his Fourth Violin Sonata, subtitled 'Children's Day at the Camp Meeting', and around 1916 he reworked that movement as a short song for voice and piano called 'At the River'. Aaron Copland made his own, plainer arrangement of the same hymn in 1952.

The LSO lists the piece under the hymn's first line and does not say in what version it will be heard. Barbara Hannigan is billed as soprano as well as conductor, and the four minutes allowed are a good deal more than Ives's song takes on its own.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Ives leaves the tune almost intact and changes everything around it. The harmony leans away from the melody, as if the accompanist were half remembering a different key, and the phrases stretch and hesitate the way a congregation's singing does. Listen above all to the ending. Lowry's refrain answers its own question with a confident 'Yes, we'll gather at the river'. Ives lets the question come back once more and leaves it hanging.

Charles Ives

1874–1954

From the Steeples and the Mountains

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ABOUT THE WORK

From the Steeples and the Mountains dates from 1901, when Ives was in his mid-twenties, three years out of Yale and beginning the career in life insurance that would pay for his composing. It is one of the short experimental pieces he wrote for himself in those years.

The scoring alone makes it unlike anything else of its time: a trumpet, a trombone and four sets of bells. The composer and conductor Gunther Schuller, who conducted it, pointed out that Ives wrote for bell pitches that did not exist in 1901 and are still hard to find, so that every performance has to decide how to realise them with chimes, other tuned percussion or pianos. The idea behind it is one Ives returned to all his life: sound heard across open space, with several sources that take no notice of one another, like the bells of different churches ringing over a New England valley.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The bells begin almost inaudibly, in pealing patterns that overlap and clash. The trumpet and trombone enter hesitantly with angular lines that copy each other at a distance, and their rhythms grow steadily more intricate as the bells grow louder. The piece is a single crescendo. After three or four minutes it reaches a clangorous peak with everything sounding at once, and then the players stop and leave the bells to ring away into silence.

Ruth Crawford Seeger

1901–1953

Rissolty Rossolty

THE COMPOSER

Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901–1953) was an American composer and folk-music scholar. In the 1920s and early 1930s, in Chicago and then New York, she was a leading member of the group of composers known as the ultramoderns, and in 1930 she became the first woman composer to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her String Quartet of 1931 is her best-known work. After marrying the musicologist Charles Seeger she turned largely to American folk song, transcribing field recordings with John and Alan Lomax and publishing collections such as *American Folk Songs for Children* (1948). Her children Mike and Peggy Seeger and her stepson Pete Seeger became central figures in the folk revival.

ABOUT THE WORK

By the late 1930s Ruth Crawford Seeger had all but stopped composing. A decade earlier she had been one of the most original of the American ‘ultramodern’ composers, and her String Quartet of 1931 is still counted among the finest American works of its kind. Then came marriage to the musicologist Charles Seeger, children, the Depression and a move to Washington, where the couple threw themselves into collecting and transcribing American folk song. After a concert of her earlier music in New York in 1938, a member of the audience asked her to write something that more people could listen to. She replied that she would.

Rissolty Rossolty was the result, and it is the only piece she wrote in this manner. CBS commissioned it for a radio series on American folk music presented by Alan Lomax, which introduced short orchestral pieces on folk tunes by composers including Copland and Roy Harris. At the first broadcast the Kentucky singer Aunt Molly Jackson sang

5 minutes

the title song before the orchestra played. The piece then lay almost unperformed: there were only a couple of concert performances in the composer's lifetime.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Three tunes are packed into a few minutes. The chattering repeated-note figure at the start comes from 'Rissolty, Rossolty', a comic song about a newly married man and his wife's house-keeping. A second song, 'Phoebe', appears in a flute solo and in plucked strings. The last section is driven by a fiddle tune, 'The Death of Callahan', which Crawford Seeger had transcribed from a field recording. She does not present the tunes one after another in neat arrangements. She weaves fragments of them together, and at the climax all three are going at once in different parts of the orchestra, a moment that owes something to Ives.

The ending is the best joke. The music simply stops, and then a scrap of the opening starts up again and breaks off. Folk musicians, she observed, do not round off a tune with a formal close; they pause, ready to begin again.

Wallingford Riegger

7 minutes

1885–1961

Study in Sonority, Op. 7

THE COMPOSER

Wallingford Riegger (1885–1961) was an American composer, born in Albany, Georgia. He studied at the Institute of Musical Art in New York, the forerunner of the Juilliard School, and then in Berlin, and worked as a conductor in Germany until the United States entered the First World War in 1917. Back in New York he became an organiser and advocate for new American music alongside Charles Ives and Henry Cowell, and he was among the first American composers to use twelve-note technique, which he handled freely. He is known for his orchestral works and for the scores he wrote for modern dance.

ABOUT THE WORK

Wallingford Riegger belongs with Ives, Ruggles and Henry Cowell in the small group of American modernists who organised their own concerts between the wars. He came to that company late. Trained in New York and Berlin as a cellist and conductor, he wrote in a conservative style into his forties. *Study in Sonority*, composed in 1927, is the piece in which he changed direction, and its publisher describes it as a significant break with his classical upbringing.

It is written for ten violins, or, as the score allows, any multiple of ten, so that a full orchestral violin section can play it. As the title says, Riegger treats the ensemble as a laboratory: with only one kind of instrument and no bass, the interest has to come from spacing, register, dynamics and ways of playing.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The ten parts are layered. One writer on Riegger describes four players carrying the melody, four the harmony and two the lowest line, though the roles shift. The harmony is built from dense, dissonant chords that Riegger holds and re-voices so that they glow instead of grate, and the whole piece grows from a short motif of a few notes that returns in different guises.

Without violas, cellos and basses the sound has no floor, and that is the point: everything happens in the upper half of the orchestra's range. Riegger marks dynamics and tempos with great precision, sometimes giving each note of the motif its own level, so listen for how much light and shade ten identical instruments can produce.

Carl Ruggles

15 minutes

1876–1971

Sun-treader

THE COMPOSER

Carl Ruggles (1876–1971) was an American composer and painter, born in Marion, Massachusetts. A relentless reviser, he left only a handful of finished works, written in a dissonant, tightly worked contrapuntal style of his own. He was a close friend of Charles Ives and belonged to the circle of American modernists around Henry Cowell and Edgard Varèse. From the 1930s he gave more and more of his time to painting and exhibited regularly; he spent his later decades in Vermont. *Sun-treader* is his largest and best-known work.

ABOUT THE WORK

Carl Ruggles finished about ten pieces in a life of ninety-five years, and *Sun-treader* is the biggest of them. He worked on it from 1926 to 1931, revising constantly. According to one account it was meant for a New York concert that Edgard Varèse was to conduct in the autumn of 1926, and missed its deadline by nearly five years. When Ruggles met Charles Ives in 1929 the two became close friends, and Ives had his best copyist prepare a clean score, which Ruggles promptly covered in corrections.

The title comes from Robert Browning's early poem *Pauline*, in which the poet salutes Shelley: 'Sun-treader, life and light be thine for ever!' Ruggles was less interested in the poem than in the single image of a giant striding across the sky.

Nicolas Slonimsky conducted the first performance in Paris in February 1932 and repeated it in Berlin, and the score was published in 1934. The first American performance is reported to have come only in 1966, when the composer was nearly ninety. It is still a rarity in the concert hall; Michael Tilson Thomas, who recorded all of Ruggles's music, has been its most persistent advocate.

Ruggles's method was his own. He wrote long, leaping melodic lines in which, as a rule, no note returns until at least seven or eight others have sounded, and he set those lines against one another in what has been called, in a phrase credited to his friend Charles Seeger, 'dissonant counterpoint'. The result is as dissonant as the music of Schoenberg and Berg but follows no system, and it has a craggy, rhetorical grandeur that writers like to connect with New England granite.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is the image of the title. Timpani pound out heavy, even strokes and the brass stride upward over them in huge intervals. This music returns several times as a pillar holding up the structure, and it invites comparison with the drumbeats at the start of Brahms's First Symphony.

Between the pillars the music moves in waves. A line starts low, climbs through the orchestra to a peak and falls back, and inside each large wave are smaller ones, so that the piece seems always to be straining upward. Quieter passages for strings and woodwind, where the lines turn lyrical, alternate with sudden accelerations. The work is in a single movement of about a quarter of an hour.

Richard Rodgers

1902–1979

The Carousel Waltz (orch. Don Walker)

THE COMPOSER

Richard Rodgers (1902–1979) was an American composer for the musical theatre, with some forty Broadway shows and more than 900 songs to his name. His career fell into two long partnerships. With the lyricist Lorenz Hart, from the 1920s to the early 1940s, he wrote sharp, urbane musical comedies including *On Your Toes*, *Babes in Arms* and *Pal Joey*. With Oscar Ham-

8 minutes

merstein II he wrote *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*, shows in which songs and story were bound together more closely than Broadway had been used to. His honours included Pulitzer, Tony, Oscar, Grammy and Emmy awards.

ABOUT THE WORK

Carousel opened at the Majestic Theatre on Broadway on 19 April 1945, two years after *Oklahoma!* and with the same team: music by Richard Rodgers, book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. Its source was *Liliom*, a 1909 play by the Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár about a fairground barker and the servant girl who loves him, which they moved from Budapest to the coast of Maine.

The show begins in an unusual way. There is no overture. Rodgers and Hammerstein open instead on a wordless scene at an amusement park, mimed and danced to this waltz, in which the audience meets the mill-girl Julie Jordan and the barker Billy Bigelow and watches them ride the carousel together. By the time anybody speaks, the situation has been set out and the love story has begun. The waltz has had a second life in the concert hall. Robert Russell Bennett began the orchestrations for the original production and scored the waltz before Don Walker took over the show; it is Walker's name that the LSO attaches to the version played here.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece starts with a fairground organ slightly out of tune with itself: woodwind chords that wheeze and slide, a few halting attempts at a rhythm, as if the machinery were being cranked into motion. Then the main waltz arrives, a broad, swinging tune.

It is a chain of waltzes more than a single one, in the Viennese manner, and each new strain is a little louder and faster than the last. Listen for the way Rodgers keeps pulling the harmony sideways when a cadence seems certain. The ending whirls the first waltz round at full tilt, with the whole orchestra and cymbals, as the carousel reaches top speed.

George Gershwin

1898–1937

Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture (arr. Robert Russell Bennett)

THE COMPOSER

George Gershwin (1898–1937) was the great reconciler of America’s musical worlds, a composer who moved between Broadway, the jazz-inflected popular song, and the concert hall with a fluency no one before him had achieved. Born in Brooklyn to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents and raised on New York’s Lower East Side, he left school at fifteen to work as a ‘song plugger’ in Tin Pan Alley, absorbing the harmonic vocabulary of popular music while teaching himself the craft of composition. His early fame came from songs and stage shows written with his brother Ira as lyricist, a body of work that gave the American songbook some of its most enduring standards. But Gershwin longed to be taken seriously as a concert composer, and in 1924 the bandleader Paul Whiteman gave him his chance with the commission that became *Rhapsody in Blue*, a sensational fusion of jazz idiom and symphonic ambition. There followed the *Concerto in F*, the tone poem *An American in Paris*, the *Cuban Overture*, and finally the folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935), his most ambitious work. He died in 1937 of a brain tumour at only thirty-eight, at the height of his powers, leaving a body of music that, more than that of any other composer, sounds like America itself.

ABOUT THE WORK

George Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess* opened in Boston in September 1935 and moved to Broadway, where it ran for sixteen weeks. Gershwin made a concert suite from it himself the following year, which he called *Catfish Row*, and died in 1937.

The *Symphonic Picture* came five years later. Fritz Reiner, then conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony, wanted a concert piece drawn from the score and went to Robert Russell Bennett, the leading Broadway orchestrator of the day and a friend and colleague of Gershwin. Reiner was unusually specific. He chose the excerpts and their order, which is not the order of the opera, and asked for saxophones and a banjo but no piano. The length, twenty-four minutes, was reportedly planned to fit on three 78 rpm records. Bennett said that he followed Reiner’s plan faithfully while staying loyal to what he knew of Gershwin’s harmonic and orchestral intentions, and much of the scoring is close to the composer’s own. Reiner conducted the first performance in Pittsburgh in 1943.

Where Catfish Row keeps to the more symphonic parts of the opera, Bennett's piece goes for the songs. As the close of a programme that begins with Ives's hymn, it also stands for the other American tradition this concert sets beside the experimentalists: music written for the theatre and meant to be loved at first hearing.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Bennett's sequence runs without a break. It opens on Catfish Row at daybreak, with the street cries of the Strawberry Woman and the Crab Man, almost the only passages in the opera that Gershwin took from what he had heard in Charleston. Clara's music and the bustling introduction to Act One follow, and only then, several minutes in, comes 'Summertime'.

After it the banjo strums in for 'I Got Plenty o' Nuttin''. The hurricane music supplies the one stretch of real violence, with the full brass and percussion. Out of it rises 'Bess, You Is My Woman Now', the love duet. The picnic music 'Oh, I Can't Sit Down' restores the high spirits; Sportin' Life's two numbers, 'There's a Boat Dat's Leavin' Soon for New York' and 'It Ain't Necessarily So', follow; and the piece ends as the opera does, with the spiritual-like 'Oh Lawd, I'm on My Way'.

Tonight's artists

Barbara Hannigan *soprano*

Barbara Hannigan, an LSO Associate Artist, put this all-American programme together herself and appears as both conductor and soprano. The first half follows the experimental line, from Ives's hymn setting through Crawford Seeger and Riegger to Ruggles's Sun-treader; after the interval come Rodgers and Gershwin, the popular tradition that grew up alongside it. The evening before, she introduces a shorter version in the LSO's Half Six Fix series, with the two Ives pieces and the Gershwin.

Barbara Hannigan, born in Nova Scotia, Canada, in 1971, is one of the most extraordinary musicians of our time: a world-renowned soprano who is also, increasingly, a celebrated conductor, often doing both at once. As a singer she is the foremost interpreter of contemporary vocal music of her generation, having premiered more than eighty new works and become especially associated with composers such as Ligeti, Boulez, Dutilleux, Hans Abrahamsen and George Benjamin (she created the role of Agnès in his *Written on Skin*). She later added conducting to her career, making a sensational impact with programmes in which she directs the orchestra and sings simultaneously, and she now holds major podium positions including Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra and Principal Guest Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony. Fearless, charismatic and a tireless champion of new music, she is the perfect guiding spirit for this adventurous programme, singing in Laura Bowler's new work and conducting the Ligeti and Strauss.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century**

Alex Ross, Picador 2008

Ross gives Ives, Ruggles and the ultramoderns their place in the story of the century, and in the same book takes Gershwin and Broadway as seriously as the avant-garde: the argument of this concert in prose.

ACCESSIBLE **Charles Ives: A Life with Music**

Jan Swafford, W. W. Norton 1998

A warm, detailed life of Ives that explains where the hymns, bells and overlapping bands in his music come from, and how he came to bank-roll friends such as Ruggles.

DEEPER **George Gershwin: His Life and Work**

Howard Pollack, University of California Press 2007

The most thorough study of Gershwin, with long chapters on Porgy and Bess, its first productions and its afterlife in arrangements such as Bennett's Symphonic Picture.

SOURCES

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17. Carl Ruggles: America's Uncompromising Composer, Interlude. <https://interlude.hk/carl-ruggles-born-on-march-11-1876-americas-uncompromising-composer/>
18. Harbison: Symphony No. 4; Ruggles: Sun-Treader; Stucky: Second Concerto for Orchestra (booklet notes), Naxos. <https://eclassical.textalk.se/shop/17115/art16/5022516-6265ad-636943983621.pdf>
19. Sun-treader (Ruggles, Carl), IMSLP. [https://imslp.org/wiki/Sun-treader_\(Ruggles,_Carl\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Sun-treader_(Ruggles,_Carl))
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George Gershwin · Porgy and Bess: A Symphonic Picture (arr. Robert Russell Bennett)

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CONCERT PROGRAMS

<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/Iso-2027-04-08-hannigan>

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