

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**April 11-12-13, 2025**  
**99th Season / Subscription Program 7**  
**J. Michael Allsen**

Guest conductor Joseph Young leads this program, beginning with Samuel Barber's concise *Second Essay for Orchestra*. We then welcome the wonderfully eclectic string trio Time for Three (Tf3). This genre-bending group, whose performances not only include string playing and vocals, also embrace a huge range of musical styles. In 2021, American composer Kevin Puts completed *Contact*, kind of "triple concerto" for them. To end, we have maestro Young's selection of movements from one of the greatest ballet scores of the 20th century, Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*.

We open with a great mid-20th-century work, one of the pieces with which Samuel Barber earned his reputation as one of America's leading composers.

**Samuel Barber**

**Born:** March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

**Died:** January 23, 1981, New York City.

***Second Essay for Orchestra, Op.17***

- **Composed:** 1942.
- **Premiere:** April 16, 1942, with the New York Philharmonic, led by Bruno Walter.
- **Previous MSO Performance:** 2017.
- **Duration:** 11:00.

**Background**

This work was commissioned by the great conductor Bruno Walter, who was then leading the New York Philharmonic.

In the 1940s, Barber was one of a new generation of American composers—Hanson, Copland, Diamond, and later Bernstein—whose works were being programmed with increasing frequency by the world's great orchestras. Barber in particular was championed by several of the period's preeminent conductors. In 1937, Artur Rodzinski conducted Barber's *Symphony No. 1* at the Salzburg Festival—the first American work to be performed there. The aging maestro Arturo Toscanini heard the symphony at Salzburg and asked Barber for a new

work, to be played by the newly-organized NBC Symphony Orchestra. Barber responded with not one, but two new pieces, the famous *Adagio for Strings*, and his *[First] Essay for Orchestra*. Another distinguished conductor who was impressed by Barber was Bruno Walter, who would eventually record the *Symphony No. 1* (the *only* work by an American composer recorded by Walter), and who commissioned him to do a new orchestral work for the New York Philharmonic. The result was the *Second Essay*.

### **What You'll Hear**

A highly concentrated work in which all of the music material derives from the melody in the opening bars, the *Second Essay* explores a huge range of feelings and textures before ending in stirring hymn.

The ideal written essay is brief and economical, treating a single subject. The title *Essay* allows a certain freedom of form within a musical work, but the *Second Essay* fits the literary definition perfectly. All of its various melodic ideas are derived from a single theme, spun out at the beginning by the solo flute. It also derives a number of distinct moods from this material—sometime with great vehemence. (A few months after the premiere, Barber wrote that: “Although it has no program, one perhaps hears that it was written in war-time.”) The first idea, quietly introduced by solo woodwinds builds to a gentle climax in the full strings. A new theme, melodically similar to the first, is built up rather quickly to a strident brass passage. A sudden crisp chord breaks the mood the clarinet begins an intense fugue—which plays out in several keys at once—that eventually gives way to an angry scherzo. The *Second Essay* ends with a broad hymn, first in the strings, and then even more dramatically in the brass.

A work composed during the depths of the Covid lockdown, *Contact* was composed in close collaboration—direct and virtual—between the composer and Time for Three.

### **Kevin Puts**

**Born:** January 3, 1972, St. Louis, Missouri.

### ***Contact***

- **Composed:** 2020-2022.
- **Premiere:** This work was actually scheduled for a premiere in June 2020, but it was canceled due to the pandemic. Tf3 and the Philadelphia Orchestra actually recorded it, playing to an empty hall, in September 2021. It was

finally premiered live in Tampa Bay by the Florida Orchestra in March 2022.

- **Previous MSO Performances:** This is our first performance of the work.
- **Duration:** 30:00

## Background

Originally scheduled for a premiere in December 2020, its performance was delayed by the lockdown, which, according to Puts allowed, for further collaboration on the score

Kevin Puts has had a host of commissions and performances by leading orchestras, ensembles and soloists throughout North America, Europe, and the Far East, including the Pacific Symphony, Utah Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Aspen Music Festival, New York Philharmonic, St. Louis Symphony, Yo Yo Ma, and many others. Puts won a Pulitzer Prize in 2012 for his opera *Silent Night*, about the famous “Christmas Eve truce” in World War I. His musical style is intended to be approachable and appealing, and Puts channels influences as diverse as Copland, Barber, Adams, Mozart, Beethoven, jazz, and the Icelandic pop singer Björk—all in his own distinctive musical voice. As he noted in a 2011 interview:

“I know there’s still a fear among some of us that trying to hold the audience rapt with attention means you’re selling out, you’re not a real composer. But for me, composing is much more complicated than the communication of an abstract idea. First thing, I’ve got to revel in the kinds of musical language that *I* care most deeply about, or I can’t write anything convincing; I might as well be dead as try to work within someone else’s aesthetic realm. Second thing—and this is not the primary aim of every composer, but I admit that it is mine—I *want* to communicate. I want audiences to be held in the moment, and be taken to the next moment. If that’s not happening, I feel like I’m falling short.”

His openness to an eclectic range of influences made for a particularly close relationship with the trio Time for Three. Puts remembers that:

“In April 2017, I heard the prodigiously gifted Time for Three perform at Joe’s pub in New York City, having recently been contacted about possibly writing a concerto for them. After hearing them play, thing, improvise, and perform their own arrangements and compositions, I felt elated by the infectious energy they exhibit as a trio. However, I couldn’t imagine conceiving any music they couldn’t improvise themselves!”

*Contact* is was initially commissioned for Tf3 by a consortium of orchestras and by the Sun Valley Music Festival, and was scheduled for a premiere in June 2020. This plan was scrapped by the pandemic lockdown, though according to Puts, the delay allowed for further refinement of the score, working closely with Tf3—that he:

“collaborated perhaps more closely than ever before in [my] career to create music tailored to the group’s unique style of performance—one which combines dazzling virtuosity, spontaneity, singing, all manner of string techniques and an infectious joy for music itself.”

### What You’ll Hear

This work is laid out in four movements

- *The Call*, based upon a refrain sung by Tf3 at the beginning.
- *Codes*, in which terse rhythms support improvisatory-style playing by the trio,
- The solemn *Contact*, which moves gradually from tension towards an uplifting ending.
- A wild finale, *Convivium*, based upon a Bulgarian folk dance.

Puts says that the four movements of the concerto “tell a story that I hope transcends abstract musical expression.” Regarding the first movement, *The Call*, he asks “Could the refrain at the beginning of the first movement be a message from Earth, sent into space?” This haunting refrain is sung *a cappella* by the trio at the beginning and travels like a *passacaglia* theme throughout the orchestra, culminating in a broad statement by the brass. There is a sudden change in texture where the trio’s violinists, supported by walking bass, reinterprets this idea as a new theme, eventually taken up by the entire orchestra. Horns return to the original refrain, and the movement ends as it began with *a cappella* singing by the trio.

In a similar vein, Puts asks in the regards to the second movement, *Codes*, “Could the Morse-code-like rhythms of the scherzo suggest radio transmissions, wave signals, etc.?” The movement proceeds as a set of rhythms barked out by the orchestra, supporting lively quasi improvisatory playing by the trio—music that has more than a little resemblance to a bluegrass hoedown!

Though a science fictional meaning is implied in the title *Contact* (as in the fine 1997 movie of the same name)—the composer describes an “image of an abandoned vessel, floating inert in the recesses of space.”—Puts also notes a meaning related to the pandemic: “The word ‘contact’ has gained new resonance

during these years of isolation and it is my hope that our concerto will be heard as an expression of yearning for this fundamental human need.” The music begins with tense atmospheric textures from the orchestra, eventually supporting improvisatory music from the trio. Near the end, there is a shift to a more positive and uplifting mood.

*Convivium* implies a happy coming together, and details of this joyous movement were apparently worked out in extensive jam sessions between Tf3 and Puts. Here the main theme is a brisk 11/8 Bulgarian folk dance, *Gankino horo*. In the second half of the movement, there are constant reminders of the “call” motive from the first movement, before the music ends in a wild conclusion.

Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*, based upon the Shakespeare tragedy, is among the finest ballet scores of the 20th century. Here we play a set of selections from this great work.

### **Sergei Prokofiev**

**Born:** April 23, 1991, Sontsivka, Ukraine.

**Died:** March 5, 1953, Moscow, Russia.

### ***Selections from “Romeo and Juliet”***

- **Composed:** 1934-35.
- **Premiere:** The first concert performance of the full score took place in Moscow in October of 1935. The ballet was not staged until 1938, with a production in Brno, Czechoslovakia, and it was finally performed in Russia in 1940, with a production by the Kirov Ballet of Leningrad (St. Petersburg).
- **Previous MSO Performances:** We have played excerpts from the score at these concerts in 1954, 1984, 1999, 2009, and 2018.
- **Duration:** See note below.

### **Background**

This work’s premiere in Prokofiev’s native Russia was delayed for several years by musical politics.

There is little doubt these days that *Romeo and Juliet* stands as Prokofiev’s most enduring ballet score. For several years, however, this enormous work was a victim of Soviet artistic politics. The original idea for this full-scale Romantic ballet on *Romeo and Juliet* seems to have come from Sergei Radlov, an influential Leningrad opera director who had collaborated on Prokofiev’s opera *The Love for*

*Three Oranges*. The “story-ballet” *Romeo and Juliet* was to have been produced at Leningrad’s Academic Theater, but at the end of 1934 the theater underwent a sudden change of administration. Sergei Kirov, the Party boss of Leningrad, was assassinated, undoubtedly at Stalin’s order, and in an incongruous move, the Soviet authorities renamed the Academic Theater to honor this “Socialist martyr.” The new Kirov Theater was tightly controlled by the Soviet artistic bureaucracy, and Radlov—whose views had long been considered suspiciously *avant garde*—fell out of favor with the authorities. Hopes for producing *Romeo and Juliet* in Leningrad evaporated, and Prokofiev began working with the Bolshoi ballet in Moscow. The score was completed in 1935 and played at the Bolshoi, whose directors pronounced the music “undanceable” and canceled the planned production. At least part of the problem was the story line, which had been twisted at Radlov’s suggestion, so that a suicidal Romeo arrived at Juliet’s tomb just a minute *after* she woke up, thus providing the most famous of all tragedies with a happy ending!

Despite these disappointments, Prokofiev continued to work on the ballet, fixing the sappy ending, and extracting two orchestral suites from the score. The concert suites he extracted from the ballet were enormously popular, both inside the Soviet Union and in Europe and the United States. In late 1938, the Kirov Ballet finally agreed to produce *Romeo and Juliet*. Their change of heart seems to have been inspired in part by the success of the suites, but also by some embarrassment over the fact that a non-Soviet company (in Czechoslovakia) had actually staged the ballet in 1938. The Kirov’s lavish production in 1940 was a huge success, and the ballet finally found a secure place in the Russian repertoire—the critics hailed *Romeo and Juliet* as a triumph of Soviet art, and hailed Prokofiev the ballet composer as the first worthy successor to Tchaikovsky.

### **What You’ll Hear**

Prokofiev’s evocative music is the perfect counterpoint to Shakespeare’s tragedy.

Movements from the ballet are often mixed and matched, as at this concert  
 [NOTE: AS of when I posted these notes online in June 2024, we did not yet know which sections of the ballet score Mr. Young would be programming. I will complete these notes when we have that repertoire. Please check back later in the season. -JMA]