

**Dallas Symphony: Spring for Music Festival at Carnegie Hall - May 2011**  
**Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2011**

Spring for Music continues its inaugural festival with the Dallas Symphony's first appearance at Carnegie Hall since Jaap van Zweden became music director in 2008. Pulitzer Prize-winning composer **Steven Stucky** (born 1949) has teamed up with the acclaimed librettist **Gene Scheer** (born 1958) for the concert drama *August 4, 1964*, a major composition for four vocal soloists, full chorus, and orchestra. Van Zweden and the DSO premiered *August 4, 1964* in September 2008 in Dallas' renowned Meyerson Symphony Center.

The Dallas Symphony commissioned this work in observance of President Lyndon Baines Johnson's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in August 2008. *August 4, 1964* explores the epic tragedy of the larger-than-life, Texas-born politician. His legacy in civil rights is admirable. His escalation of the Vietnam War remains controversial. Taken together, those two issues encapsulate the turbulent 1960s.

With the chorus functioning sometimes as crowd and sometimes as Greek Chorus, and the orchestra as eloquent supporter and complement to Scheer's vivid text, *August 4, 1964* is a proud and powerful addition to the corpus of musical works with political and historical resonance.

A Stephen Spender poem figures prominently, sung exclusively by the chorus

*August 4, 1964* is neither a requiem nor an opera. It is not a sacred work (though it has a spiritual dimension), nor is it a staged drama (though plenty of drama transpires within its pages). Librettist Gene Scheer worked diligently to zero in on an appropriate topic, devouring biographies of LBJ and perusing thousands of documents at the LBJ library in Austin.

"For the musical work, I had to explain the events in broad strokes," says Scheer. "I wanted to make clear the fact that LBJ sent the bombing raids because he and McNamara mistakenly thought our forces had been attacked on August 4th. And of course I wanted to outline the tragic events which unfolded in Philadelphia, Mississippi at the same time. Still, the primary idea of this piece was to transcend the mere facts and to allow music to depict the emotional reality of this pivotal day, which turned out to be a significant turning point for LBJ and the nation."

Scheer's concept for the libretto made excellent sense to Stucky, who was a teenager during the events that unfold in the course of *August 4, 1964*. He remembers those events vividly, though he acknowledges that, like Scheer, he underwent a refresher course in these corners of American history in the process of writing this work.

Scheer's libretto does not hew strictly to that date, although several scenes in the Oval Office evoke the immediacy of the day's historic events. He opens with laments from two of the murdered civil rights workers' mothers, recalling the tragedy and horror of the day after the fact. We also meet Johnson's Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara (tenor). A juxtaposition has been established.

### **A poem by Stephen Spender**

The chorus' initial appearance also departs from the actual events of the title date. Their text is the English poet Stephen Spender's "I think continually of those who were truly great." A contemporary and friend of W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, Spender (1909-1995) came to prominence in the 1930s, writing personal and political poetry that revealed a strong social conscience.

His poem found its way into the libretto when Scheer learned that Andrew Goodman's mother, Carolyn Goodman, had placed a copy of it on the wall of her New York apartment when she learned that her son had been murdered. She also had several lines of the poem engraved on her son's tombstone. "Spender's verse is connected to the emotional experience that Carolyn Goodman had during that awful time," Scheer says. "The lines from his poem were what brought her comfort." Stucky's setting reserves the Spender poem for the chorus.

Other movements draw upon various sources: LBJ's recollection of a visit to the home of a poor family in Appalachia; Mrs. Chaney's recollection of her grandfather's refusal to sell a successful family farm and the consequences of that refusal; Michael Schwerner's application to work for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the famous "We Shall Overcome" speech, which Lyndon Johnson delivered to a joint session of Congress on March 15, 1965, following racial violence in Selma, Alabama. (Stucky incorporates snatches of the eponymous protest song in this movement; "We Shall Overcome" became the unofficial anthem of the civil rights movement in the 1960s.) Several members of the chorus have brief solos in the first two "Oval Office" movements, singing text taken from LBJ's daily diaries.

### **Reflective moment for orchestra alone**

Midway through *August 4, 1964*, the orchestra plays an instrumental Elegy. "We thought it would be good to break up the pacing with an orchestral movement," explains Stucky. "It occurs at an emotional point, when the horrific import of some of what you've heard begins to add up. It's business as usual at the White House, except that Johnson and McNamara are beginning to talk about bombing."

Stucky actually composed the Elegy first, adapting a choral setting of the Latin motet "O vos omnes" that he had written in 2005. "It was actually the first part of *August 4, 1964* that I wrote," he recalls. "I didn't have the libretto yet, but thought I'd better get started anyway! The principal motive from the Elegy eventually became the main motive of the whole oratorio once I composed the rest of the music."

The score calls for three flutes (second doubling alto flute, third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets (third doubling piccolo trumpet), three trombones (third doubling bass trombone), tuba, timpani, a large percussion battery [see below], harp, a quartet of vocal soloists, mixed chorus, and strings.