PROGRAM NOTES

SUNDAY, JUNE 12
5:30PM

The Company You Keep

No composer can expect to be performed in isolation, least of all Webern, whose miniatures can scarcely stand alone or suffice to sustain an evening (though an evening would do to survey his entire published oeuvre). Music lives through the company it keeps—what it draws from the past, what it shares with its time, and what it anticipates about the future. Webern's riches lie in such connections; his music takes flight when programmed with Schubert, Bach, or Messiaen to bring out its lyricism, contrapuntal rigor, or mystic inwardness. These movements for string quartet were his first purely instrumental forays into atonality and his first essays in aphoristic brevity. Nothing could have seemed more radical when they were premiered in 1910 and they continue to feel new a century later. But when interwoven with four even shorter movements from George Crumb's *Black Angels*, Webern's pieces sound expansive, even lushly Romantic, and their programmatic associations, normally hidden from view, seem to rise to the surface. Crumb, for his part, makes no secret of his programmatic intent. *Black Angels*, written during the Vietnam War, was "conceived as a kind of parable on our troubled contemporary world" and its three parts—*Departure* (from which *Night of the Electric Insects* and *Sounds of Bones and Flutes* are drawn), *Absence* (*Sarabanda de la Muerte Oscura*), and *Return* (*God-music*)—represent "the voyage of the soul." Webern's pieces are teeming with unusual string effects, but Crumb goes still further to include sounds produced by voices and a variety of percussion instruments. In this company Webern is not so much a prophet of the future as an anchor of the past.

Maria Schneider's new work began with an idea about the company Dawn Upshaw keeps:

> After premiering my first work with Dawn Upshaw I had the feeling that if I ever wrote for her again, I might like to place her in a setting where she would have improvisation around her. I wanted her to feel the excitement I feel when my music is approached differently every night, where each performance is truly a creative collaboration.

Toward this end Schneider has called on three longtime collaborators—Frank Kimbrough, Scott Robinson, and Jay Anderson—whose improvisational abilities extend far beyond the language of jazz. They join the Australian Chamber Orchestra, whose members play without a conductor and are thus, like jazz musicians, deeply attuned to listening and responding to each other. Together they provide a special setting for the soloist:

> In this piece Dawn is able to vary the rhythms from performance to performance, to *move* or to *wait* in accordance with what she is hearing and feeling around her. In the end, it becomes unclear who is really leading or following—they all just relate to one another in the environment created by the poetry and the collective experience.

The texts for *Winter Morning Walks* are by Ted Kooser, a poet for whom the composer has a special affinity:

> His metaphors bring such powerful feeling to this 'seemingly basic' Midwest landscape and illuminate the depth of feeling I've always felt for the prairie country we share. Perhaps I am continually putting something similar into my music without knowing or trying. In any event these poems, set in Midwest winter landscapes, moving from the winter solstice to the vernal equinox, feel like home to me and became a natural inspiration for my own musical voice.

The kind of inspiration that Maria Schneider, Ted Kooser—and Dawn Upshaw, for that matter—draw from their Midwestern roots is not so very different from the way region and landscape influenced the music of Edvard Grieg and Béla Bartók. Both were products of that surge of 19th-century nationalism that sought to invigorate concert music with an infusion of folk elements: the rhythms, dance, and improvisational forms, motivic and melodic patterns, and harmonic idiosyncrasies that gave each region and ethnic group its distinctive identity. No composer was more assiduous in collecting and studying folk sources than Bartók. The songs presented here are drawn from three collections made between 1907 and 1929 and totaling 48 songs, a small fraction of the nearly 9,000 melodies that Bartók and his colleague Zoltán Kodály collected and catalogued across Hungary, the Balkans, and even North Africa.

Edvard Grieg, like Bartók, was classically trained and, after several years' study in Leipzig, well acquainted with German musical models. And like Bartók, Grieg discovered his own voice in the company of his countrymen. For Grieg it was the great Norwegian violinist Ole Bull who introduced him the folk music of his native Norway:

> He played for me the trollish Norwegian melodies that so strongly fascinated me, and awakened the desire to have them as the basis for my own melodies. He opened my eyes to the beauty and originality in Norwegian music. Through him I became acquainted with many forgotten folk songs, and above all, with my own nature.

Elements of such music are readily apparent in Grieg's best-known works, including the incidental music to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, his Piano Concerto, and his String Quartet in G minor. One particularly characteristic motive, familiar from the beginning of the Piano Concerto, is the falling second followed by a third. It is also a prominent feature of the song "Spillemaend" (on a text by Ibsen) whose melody provides the lyric second theme of the quartet's first movement. The song's opening motive, however, is found in each of the quartet's movements and is especially prominent at the outset of the first and third movements. The G-minor String Quartet is an ambitious, grandly scaled work, whose bold gestures and frequent use of string double stops suggests an almost symphonic texture. Some early critics reproached Grieg on this account, claiming that this quartet was chamber music in name only. This may be the reason the piece works so well in an arrangement for string orchestra, which is to say: a quartet with just a bit of company.