



Program Notes

by Dana Bonstrom

Michael Gandolfi

Born: July 5, 1956
Melrose, Massachusetts

Chesapeake: Summer of 1814

Composed: 2013

Duration: 28 minutes

Instrumentation: 2 flutes (2nd dbls. piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd dbls. English horn), 2 Bb clarinets, 2 bassoons (2nd dbls. contrabassoon), 4 horns, 2 C trumpets, 2 trombones, 1 bass trombone, 1 tuba, timpani, 3 percussionists: xylophone, vibraphone, tubular chimes, glockenspiel, crash cymbals, suspended cymbal, tam tam, bass drum, snare drum, triangle, wood blocks (med/large), wind machine; harp, mixed chorus, strings

“Chesapeake: Summer of 1814” By Michael Gandolfi Historical Narrative by Dana Bonstrom

September 14, 2014 marks the bicentennial of the drafting of a poem, in the early morning aftermath of the Battle of Baltimore, by a young lawyer held captive on a British frigate in the outer precincts of Baltimore Harbor.

Chesapeake: Summer of 1814 is a meditation on the importance of music in the lives and endeavors of our forebears (and their British cousins) in the early years of the nineteenth century. The work is predicated almost exclusively on contemporary accounts of the music that was sung and played in the course of the prosecution of the War of 1812.

Prologue: Origins of a Melody

The work begins with a statement of *To Anacreon in Heaven*, the original song upon whose melody Francis Scott Key draped his poem. The

song, written to honor a London gentlemen’s club, was well-known in America. In fact, Key had earlier borrowed the melody to set his poem celebrating the American naval hero, Stephen Decatur.

American Pastoral

This movement is built upon *Durang’s Hornpipe*, a dance written by William Hoffmaster for John Durang, America’s first professional dancer, and reputedly George Washington’s favorite performer. It underscores the maritime origins of the war, as well as the bumptious vigor of the citizens of the new republic. As Alexis de Toqueville wrote in 1831 “...the American has no time to tie himself to anything... instability, instead of occurring to him in the form of disasters, seems to give birth to nothing around him but wonders...”

Coincidentally, *The Star-Spangled Banner* is believed to have been first sung in public by John Durang’s son, Ferdinand, at a Baltimore tavern in early October 1814.

Program Notes

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The Battle of Bladensburg: August 24, 1814

On August 19, 1814, British troops came ashore in Maryland. Until that time, the war had been waged principally in the Atlantic, and on the Canadian border. The British arrival in the Chesapeake signalled a determination to conclude the war quickly and decisively.

At Bladensburg a British expedition easily defeated a much larger but utterly disorganized American force, sending them into a panicked retreat. The British are here represented by the triumphant *Rule Britannia!*; the Americans by *Hail, Columbia!*—begun proudly, but trailing off into quiet despair.

The British March on Washington: August 25, 1814

Washington D.C., in 1814, was little more than a village of 7,000 residents with no strategic value to Britain's war aims. The town had symbolic value, however: the Americans had earlier invaded the Canadian city of York (now Toronto) and burned the parliament building to the ground. The British were determined to return the insult.

We first hear *Mrs. Madison's Minuet* (composed for Dolley Madison by Alexander Reinagle in 1809) implying a state of normality in the White House, even as the British

advance. Drums announce the approach of the British army; the advancing troops sing Handel's chorus *See, the Conquering Hero Comes!* before setting torch to the White House and Capitol.

Onward, to Baltimore!

The British now moved on their true objective: Baltimore, center of American maritime activity, and home to the privateers who had harassed the British merchant and naval fleets for years.

The Battle of Baltimore was fought on land and water. At North Point, seven miles to the east of the city, a likely over-confident British force (*God Save the King*) encountered a defiant and determined American militia (*Yankee Doodle*, with lyrics written for recruitment of volunteers); the Americans handed the British a decisive and costly defeat.

Calm Before the Storm: Baltimore Harbor, September 13, 1814

The second front in the Battle of Baltimore was at the entrance to Baltimore Harbor on the Patapsco River, where the British navy planned an assault first on Fort McHenry, and then on the city itself. A contemplative calm descends before the battle erupts into a terrifying night-long bombardment of the fort by British cannon and rockets.

The Guns Fall Silent: September 14, 1814

In the quiet first moments of dawn, Francis Scott Key approaches a British officer aboard HM Frigate *Surprise* and asks his questions:

"I beg your pardon: may I ask if you know what has happened? Has Baltimore fallen? Has Fort McHenry been seized? All of yesterday I saw our flag flying over the fort. And last night, at the height of battle, the sky made bright as day by the light of your rockets and flares, the flag was still there. But what of it now? The guns have fallen silent. Who is the victor? Who has won? Wait! The sun has found it. The Stars and Stripes still fly!"

Key's Question Becomes a Song

As Francis Scott Key speaks, his words are taken up by the chorus and transformed into the first verse of what we recognize as our national anthem, *The Star-Spangled Banner*

Dana Bonstrom is a writer, editor, poet and librettist who has worked with composer Michael Gandolfi on several commissions. He is Principal at Dana Bonstrom Creative.