

Samuel Barber: An American Romantic

By Joshua Shank

The story of how Samuel Barber earned a place in the pantheon of twentieth-century American music is a familiar tale. Like his contemporaries, he was raised on the east coast (near Philadelphia), had access to the upper echelons of concert music (his aunt was a leading contralto at the Metropolitan Opera and his uncle a famous composer), and received an education at one of America's premiere conservatories (The Curtis Institute). What set Barber apart--and continues to make his star shine even brighter--was his unabashed romanticism. He wrote lyrical music that soared and breathed that could at times be both sentimental and reflective. This was unpopular at the time but, as the music of the past century comes into sharper historical focus, it's become apparent that Barber was one of the great geniuses of American music; a man present to the gifts moving in him who, though he struggled with being able to express the totality of his personality and life, gave something significant and beautiful to the world around him.

Samuel Barber was born on March 9, 1910, a year that would see the premieres of Igor Stravinsky's landmark ballet, *The Firebird*, and Gustav Mahler's massive eighth symphony. He grew up in a comfortable and distinguished Irish-American family in the town of West Chester, Pennsylvania. His father, Samuel Sr., was a doctor and his mother, Marguerite, was a pianist. By all accounts, their son was a gifted musician. At six years old he began to play the piano and a year later wrote his first musical. His parents had hoped he would be interested in the activities of a "normal American boy," but their son could not be dissuaded. When he was eight years old, he left the following note on his mother's dressing table:

Dear Mother: I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Now don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now without any nonsense. To begin with, I was not meant to be an athlet [sic]. I was meant to be a composer, and will be I'm sure. I'll ask you one more thing . —Don't ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football. —*Please*— Sometimes I've been worrying about this so much that it makes me mad! (not very).

Two years later—at all of 10 years old—he ambitiously attempted to write an opera.

Precocious childhood stories aside—and luckily for us—his parents went on to encourage their son's obvious musical gifts and in 1924 he became one of the first students admitted to the famed Curtis Institute of Music. He went on to graduate with a triple emphasis in voice, piano, and composition.

In 1928, while still a student at Curtis, Barber was tasked with looking after a new composition student from Italy by the name of Gian Carlo Menotti. Because Menotti could barely speak English, he was sent Barber's way so the two could converse in French, and thus began a relationship which would inform and enrich both composers' professional, personal, and romantic lives for decades to come.

After graduating from Curtis, Barber went on to travel the world with Menotti and receive numerous accolades for his compositions. One in particular, the "Adagio" movement from his 1936 work for string quartet, became enormously popular after he arranged it for string orchestra and the rest is essentially history.

In 1958, Barber won the Pulitzer Prize for his opera, *Vanessa* (with a libretto by Menotti), and five years later won again for his *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*. He is one of only four composers in the history of the award to have won it more than once (Menotti is one of the other three).

His place in the upper echelons of concert music is certainly assured today but, during his lifetime, his music was often viewed as old-fashioned and out of touch by his peers. In those days it was en vogue to be fascinated by the more prickly and extreme music of composers like Pierre Boulez or Karlheinz Stockhausen. To them, the sweeping, romantic gestures of Samuel Barber were anachronistic.

He suffered a major setback in 1966 when his opera, *Antony and Cleopatra*, was premiered at the Metropolitan Opera. The piece had been commissioned to celebrate the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center and famed Italian director Franco Zeffirelli was hired as both librettist and stage director. The

ensuing production featured overly elaborate sets and gaudy costumes which distracted from Barber's lyrical, expressive music. On one famous occasion, a show was ground to a halt when an onstage turntable broke under the weight of a live elephant.

The critics were merciless and the opera, which had stirred so much anticipation in advance of its premiere, was dropped almost immediately and ridiculed for its largesse. The rejection of this show affected Barber deeply and, over the course of the rest of his life, he became embittered and depressed. He struggled with alcoholism and creative blocks and, in 1973, his 30-year partnership with Menotti disintegrated. They sold their house in Mount Kisco, New York and Barber moved into an apartment in New York City where he spent his remaining years and wrote little music. He died of cancer in 1981 at the age of 70 and was buried in his hometown of West Chester next to his parents and sister. A plot next to his remained for his former partner (who died in 2007); however, Menotti chose to be buried in Scotland, and thus it bears only a stone marker which says simply: "To The Memory Of Two Friends."

Presented here are some of Barber's finest works for choir. As with his instrumental music, they showcase his ability to write emotive music within pristinely sophisticated structures; works of extraordinary beauty and difficulty.

The Virgin Martyrs uses a text by a medieval Belgian monk which praises female martyrs. The first stanza of the poetry lists them out as the music twists around itself attempting to find an emotion to settle on. After all this wandering we eventually come to rest on a gentle chord at "Worthy now of God's company." The effect is striking, and the music immediately turns inward as the martyred women gather up flowers to make a bouquet "for love."

Let down the bars, O death was written in the same summer as the famous "Adagio for Strings" and, while that orchestral work went on to become synonymous with grief, its choral sibling is the one that was actually performed at Barber's funeral in 1981. He sets the text as a simple chorale and of its eight lines only two ever repeat: "Let down the bars, O Death - The tired Flocks come in." At first we hear them as a hushed invocation which crescendos into the remainder of the work, but when they reappear the music is unchanged except that the dynamics are now in reverse. The whisper that began the work is now a declamation meant to shout open the door before letting the "tired flocks" gently slip away.

Twelfth night begins with the line, "No night could be darker than this night," and the strained, sometimes dissonant music never looks back. Here Barber paints anguish and despair over a text which joins Christ's birth to the earth's reawakening from "utter death." At the mention of "men with shepherd's eyes," the music tightens like a vice before building to a climax a few pages later. The piece ends on a defeated note; repeating the same lonely text that began it.

To Be Sung on the Water begins with hollow harmonies but quickly moves elsewhere. Here the tenors and basses repeat three words—as if to suggest the sound of oars rippling in the water—while the sopranos and altos take on the bulk of the text. The men briefly give up the rowing to the women but, over the course of the movement, these two sections of the choir never sing anything together. There is an unnamed distance between them—which perhaps we're not meant to know—but, in the end, it seems to be given voice in the resigned, melancholy chord that finishes the piece.

A stopwatch and an ordnance map is scored for tenor/bass choir with timpani and uses a text that describes the death of a soldier in the Spanish Civil War. The music is intentionally spooky with an air of dread ruling the proceedings. Immediately before the men begin singing "He stayed faithfully in that place," the timpanist sets about sliding the pitches of the drums with the tuning pedals and Barber, a composer who was looked at as somewhat old-fashioned during his lifetime, sounds decidedly "modern."

Sure on this shining night eventually became one of the composer's most famous and oft-performed art songs before he arranged it for choir 30 years after it was initially composed. Barber writes sublime music which reverently navigates the poetry and, once the final chord is played, it's easy to see why the piece is so beloved by singers.

In 1936, Barber wrote his only work for string quartet and almost immediately arranged its second movement for

a full string orchestra. The new piece, now called *Adagio for Strings*, was performed by the famed conductor Arturo Toscanini—a classical kingmaker at the time—and its composer became an overnight sensation. The “Adagio” has gone on to become something of a universal expression of grief and, in arranging it for choir, Barber pulls the music even closer to this notion by laying it under the ***Agnus Dei*** from the Roman Catholic mass. The result is a meditation which unfolds in endless spirals before the bottom drops out and the music rises to a deafening climax. Then the supplicating cries waft gently back into the ether.

The title of ***Reincarnations*** refers to a set of poems by James Stephens which are based on his translations of the work of nineteenth-century Irish poet Anthony Raftery. “**Mary Hynes**” refers to a woman purported to be the most beautiful in all of western Ireland and Barber sets the text with a sense of ecstatic lyricism. He slows the singers down for the final stanza and they tread lightly before settling into the billowy final phrase on the word, “airily.”

The character which inspired “**Anthony O’Daly**” was an environmentalist unjustly hanged in the early 1800s. Stephens’s text focuses almost solely on the sense of disbelief at the finality of loss and Barber’s resultant music is numb. The basses sit grief-stricken on a single note for a full 40 measures and, when they finally take up the melody, it is transformed into a thrashing torrent of sound which halts on the word “grief”; a cold silence experienced at the sudden loss of a loved one.

The text for “**The Coolin**” takes its name from the curly lock of blond hair at the nape of the neck which eventually became used as a nickname for a loved one. Barber’s music is luxuriant and warm. We dwell for a moment at the edge of the phrase, “And a lip to find out a lip,” before tenderly fading back into the same music which opened the movement.