

SAMUEL BARBER

David C F Wright DMus

Samuel Barber died on 23 January 1981.

He was probably the most successful American composer who enjoyed fame in his own time. He conceived being successful as having his music included in the subscription concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra as Rachmaninov had also experienced.

He considered himself to be lucky and had many performances and, because his music was never, or seldom, adventurous, he was never subject to any hostile criticism apart perhaps from one work, his Symphony no. 2.

He often said that he wrote as he wished; that he wrote for himself.

He was born in Westchester, Pennsylvania, on 9 March 1910, the son of a respected doctor and governor of the local school. Sam always wanted to be a composer and often related the story that when he was only eight years old, his mother sent him out to play football, which annoyed him. He protested saying that he wanted to be a composer and nothing else. From the age of six he had begun to learn the piano and the cello.



Photo: *Carl Van Vechten*

When he was at High School, Sam, and other interested students, were allowed to go to the Friday afternoon concerts of the Philadelphia Orchestra, which he loved. In other matters he was shy and very moody, painfully introspective, and only seemed to be fun-loving when with his sister.

At the age of fourteen, he became the organist at a local Presbyterian Church but, like organists before him from Bach to Raff and Charles Ives, he annoyed the authorities by embellishing the music so that the congregation could not sing the hymns. And he was unrepentant. But while he was the organist he earned a hundred dollars a month.

He always said that music should never be difficult for an audience. Nonetheless, he wanted to progress and, also at the age of fourteen, went up to the Curtis Institute where he met and began a friendship and life-long loving relationship with Gian-Carlo Menotti. They first met in 1928.

Barber studied with Rosario Scalero, who had travelled widely and was European in personal musical taste, being particularly impressed with the music of Brahms. Menotti, Italian born, in 1911, had studied at the Milan Conservatory between 1924-7 and on Toscanini's advice went to Philadelphia.

The music culture of Italy, such as it was at that time, was antipathetic to Brahms and it was Barber who introduced him to it. Barber also spoke fluent French and Italian.

The polish of Brahms is clearly seen in Barber's own work.

At Curtis, Barber studied the piano with Isabelle Vengerova and singing with Emilio de Gorgorza.

Sam had a good baritone voice and this can be heard from his own recording of his setting of Dover Beach dating from 1933, a truly sublime work. He also developed into being an excellent pianist.

His compositions were described as old-fashioned and romantic. There existed nationalistic Americana as in the music of Aaron Copland, for example, but the European influence was there in Sam's music. Barber used to say that music should first and foremost be music not stained with national or political dogma. Copland, always loquacious, talked to us at great length about Barber's conservatism and that he was never criticised or lambasted because he played safe musically: "Sam did not see the need to preserve our American heritage. He did not recognise jazz as real music and the only indigenous American music", Copland told me.

The truth of the matter was that Aaron was jealous and not as cultured as Barber whose music is far better both in structure and content whereas Copland, like Alan Rawsthorne, could be very lazy in his music and pass it off as economical. There is seldom richness in a Copland score or the satisfying structure than Barber learned from Brahms's symphonies. Copland's laziness is shown in vast expanses of inactivity and a predominance of slow music. It takes less effort.

Barber hated making corrections and revisions which were agony for him causing him tiredness and grumpiness and to be come depressed.

The piece that everyone knows is his Adagio for Strings originally the slow movement of his String Quartet no. 1 where it obviously works so much better. Toscanini played this and the superb Essay no. 1 in the same concert in 1936. Barber had sent scores to the maestro and heard nothing and was annoyed. When a meeting was arranged between them Barber refused to go asking that Toscanini be told that he was ill. Wily Toscanini saw through this and said that that was not so and that Barber was angry with him.

The year 1936 saw the premiere of his Symphony no. 1 which is arguably, his best purely orchestral work.

The Adagio is not a trivial piece but, by 1949, Barber was irritated that this was the only piece of his that was really known. He used to play a game and listen to performances spotting wrong notes since, as most orchestras felt that they knew it inside out, they did not rehearse it thoroughly.

Copland said, "It is a perfect piece of music just as Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto is (really?) but all the best gestures of Sam's character are developed in later and better works. The Adagio is not a warhorse. It is straight from the heart with a wonderful steadiness and sense of flow with maximum sincerity."

But it has been done to death. Within ten minutes of the assassination of President Kennedy it was played on radio stations all over America. Over the next month it was literally played night and day all over America and became a national funeral piece.

But is it about death?

Was Virgil Thomson right when he said it was really a love scene, a bed scene and very erotic?

Someone else said, "Played well, it will tear you apart."

The great American soprano, Leontyne Price, wants it played at her funeral. She worked closely with Barber and created the role of Cleopatra in his second opera.

Another fine American composer, William Schuman, said of the Adagio, "It has a universal appeal. Whether it is a death scene or a love scene depends on your attitude to life itself. It is a good piece

because you are unaware of the techniques employed in it. It is perfectly made music even if it is not perfect in itself.”

Unintentionally Barber showed his lack of interest in Americana in his Excursions Op. 20 for piano in which he draws on regional idioms but does not name the regions. He did not believe in nationalism, saying that conservatives could live happily anywhere.

Perhaps Barber’s loveliest piece is Knoxville: Summer of 1915 for soprano and orchestra to a text by James Agee who was the same age as the composer. It was premiered in 1948. The poem reminded Barber of his own childhood with lazy, lovely summer evenings, that marginal time between twilight and sleep. It is wonderfully evocative. It is biographical, nostalgic and innocent conjuring up those balmy summer evenings. The imagery of America is well caught with rocking chairs, front porches, trolley buses, ice cream vendors and the smell of sweet blossoms.

It had a great public appeal. It still does.

But there is always some uninformed dissension. In 1938 the New York Times called Barber’s music dull and serious. Even so, in 1941 ASCAP referred to him as America’s most widely performed composer.

The Violin Concerto of 1941 does not work. It has two consecutive and rather lovely slow movements and a brief vigorous finale which does not belong to it. The two slow movements should be separate pieces as, for example, the Sibelius Romances for violin and orchestra, and the finale should be scrapped.

Then came the Symphony no. 2.

Barber was in the Armed Services during World War Two and was allowed, indeed encouraged, to compose. Each fortnight he had to report to a Colonel to show what he had done and play through the latest instalment on a battered piano. The Colonel hearing the composer’s complaints would reply, “Do what you can, Corporal!”

The Boston Symphony Orchestra under Serge Koussevitsky premiered it in 1944. Twenty four year later Barber was drinking champagne cocktails with his publisher and said, “All my work is performed except the Second Symphony.” Then he added, “It is because it is no good!” and he went to the Hire Library and tore up the score.

It was composed under duress and to honour the US Air Force and, foolishly, Barber tried to be modern but it was beyond him. Despite his obvious musical gifts he was restricted. He did, however, rescue the second movement and called it Night Flight.

In 1949 he composed his Piano Sonata not, as is generally thought, for Vladimir Horowitz although he was to champion it.

Menotti and Barber had bought a house about an hour’s drive from New York which house they called Capricorn. They had a brilliant social life. Actors, musicians, writers and other famous people would visit. Menotti was kind and hospitable whereas Barber was not always complimentary about people. Horowitz went there and the Sonata proceeded. Poulenc also visited and was very impressed with the sonata calling the finale a knockout. Barber played the third movement to Horowitz and deliberately fell on the floor at the end of it. Mrs Horowitz was not pleased and called Barber a constipated musician. Barber was very angry and wrote a final fugue which he said would keep the pianist active!

The publishers did not like the sonata saying it was four attempts at different styles which did not work. William Schumann thought it a towering piece.

The Piano Concerto is even better. The pianist John Browning worked with the composer on this fine work.

What Barber did was to invite an artist to his house and get that artist to play his existing repertoire over four or five days and note the performer's strengths and use them in a work he would write for that artist. But Barber would always listen to suggestions and when he wanted to end the first movement quietly, Browning and Erich Leinsdorf said this would be unsuitable and only merge ineffectively into the slow movement. And a terrific slow movement it is!

The fee from the publishers for this splendid concerto was a swimming Pool!

Living with Menotti caused Barber to turn to opera. His first opera, Vanessa, has a libretto by Menotti. His opera Anthony and Cleopatra of 1966 was a flop due to Zeffirelli's stage sets and production which did not work. The glitter and lavish spectacle, the movement of stage and props drowned out the music which was sacrificed for the showy production. Leontyne Price had a dreadful time and rightly confirmed that the music was excellent but not so Zeffirelli's production. Although stunning it was hopelessly wrong and impractical. It was written for the opening of the new Metropolitan in the Lincoln Centre.

Barber was not a great composer in that he was not as original as Irving Fine or as courageous as Roger Sessions but with William Schumann he shares the distinction of being America's most conservative and 'romantically classical' composer.

(1874)

© Copyright David C F Wright, DMus, 1982 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.