

AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XIX

SAMUEL BARBER

ROBERT HORAN

SINCE the ancient part of this century, when the movement of modernism in music, as in all the arts, was embarked upon; since its tar-and-feather days of riot and conversion when the premiere of a new work constituted a breach of the peace, musical composition seems to have suffered from a fraudulent energy, a kind of "middle age." There is an over-emphasis everywhere on the periphery, the marginalia, the function or the contemporaneity of music. It may be neither here nor there that a certain natural period of revolutionary brilliance is clearing away and leaving a good deal of smoke. But today one has so often the feeling that music has a superfluity of supports and facilities, what Busoni has termed a "mimicry of temperament."

If music has lost some of its earlier vitality, musical criticism, on the other hand, has become perverse and deceptively sophisticated. It is a commonplace to hear Wagner referred to as "pleasant" or the Beethoven symphonies as "nicely made;" which is simply a reversal of the critical terminology for standard works so that certain contemporary ones may be more easily included on the same level. It is therefore refreshing and uncommon to discover individuals who, without resorting to any current standard of methods or mannerisms, have entered the front-rank of contemporary composition.

It is in this sense that the music of Samuel Barber seems of particular importance; because of its concentration on the beauty and possibility of design; because of its alive and moving personality and its entirely musical integrity.

What has been designated as conservative in Barber's work is partially due to this emphasis on the larger aspects of architecture. Instead of cohering small units, he coheres large ones; instead of designing for textural pieces, explosions, surprises, unusual sound combinations in small relationships, he regards these as a matter of texture, and texture as the surface of his fabric. His orchestration is simple and aristocratic. His movement uses little static development and the invention seems to move underneath

rather than on top of the music. It is essentially non-eclectic and non-urban and often romantic in character. His personality is decisive often by virtue of what he has learned to do without—the temptation toward breaking up instead of sustaining, the abdication of strong thematic material in favor of immediacy or effect. He makes concessions to simplicity but none to pedestrianism, although his work suffers occasionally from a false sense of security.

This kind of music is neither sinewy nor athletic. It is not particularly robust or nervous, in the American sense of these words. It is not folk-songish or nationalistic; its flavor as well as its technic is rather international in character. This perhaps explains, to a degree, the interest it has sustained outside the borders of this country. Toscanini introduced Barber's *Adagio For Strings* in South America; William Walton was responsible for arranging performances of his works in England; the *Symphony In One Movement* was performed at the Augusteo in Rome by Molinari and at the Salzburg Festival by Rodzinski; Sibelius wrote enthusiastically to the composer upon hearing his works in Finland; and, most recently, Russia, through the composer Khrennikov, has asked for all of his published works to be sent by plane. This, in addition to the fact that, according to the analysis made by ASCAP of symphonic programs for the season of 1941-'42, Barber was more often played than any other American symphonic composer. At the present age of thirty-three, he is a private in the United States Army.

Of Barber's orchestral works, the two earlier ones, *Overture To The School For Scandal* and *Music For A Scene From Shelley* need not detain us. They are programmatic, incidental music in traditional forms, although not without charm and a certain orchestral elegance. It is with the *Symphony In One Movement*, written in 1935-36 that Barber's handling of form becomes more personal.

There is a kind of impeccable logic which unifies this work in design. The units are compressed and astringent from the formal standpoint. The general structure may be analyzed as follows: three themes are announced, as in a classical exposition, but, after a brief development, instead of a recapitulation, the first theme, in diminution, becomes the basis of a Scherzo section; the second, in augmentation, becomes the basis for the Andante section, and the third appears over the Passacaglia which is constructed of the first theme. In this fashion a logical synthesis of the four-movement symphonic form is achieved.



SAMUEL BARBER

A sketch by

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Barber reveals in this work, as elsewhere, a rare gift for slow movement. The *Adagio for Strings*, of the same period, with its disarming simplicity, its sonority and its climax on a consonant chord, is the sort of music one might associate with the early paintings of Chirico. It has an equal isolation; one imagines this music at home in Chirico's deserted courtyards and pink buildings, among those shadowy children that disappear suddenly under archways and around corners like startled animals. In the Andante section from the *Symphony* the theme is announced by the oboe over a sustained C# pedal of muted strings.



This is Barber at his best and lyricism at its rarest. Made with singular economy, it appears to have said all there was to be said at that moment, in that way, and it carries the seal of his personality by its fluidness and intensity. The Scherzo section of the work has been as recently revised as this year; the original version was weak in its development and tended to be static rather than exuberant.

The *Symphony* began a certain ellipsis in form which was developed later in the two orchestral *Essays*. The condensation of design, the shortening of the lines produced, in the *Second Essay* particularly, more tension than is characteristic of Barber's style.

He had, for some time, felt the necessity for a short orchestral form, abstract rather than descriptive in character; a form that might correspond in length, and, to a degree in organization, to the literary essay. It has been Barber's intention to avoid that overworked department of modern composition, the three-part form, by fashioning, in the *Essays*, a subtle two-part form, in the two sections of which, although completely contrasting in mood and color, there is a reciprocal interplay of thematic material. There is, too, a definite restraint, an almost moralistic emotion in this form as Barber uses it, with very little emphasis on orchestral sensuousness, on sound for the sake of sound. It has, at many times, a quality similar to that in the writing of André Gide although it takes less risks with propriety than the French novelist. Both *Essays*, especially the *Second*, are terse and epigrammatic; they are music of disenchantment. The Scherzo of the *First Essay*, although self-consistent, would appear to be misplaced in this form. It is the weaker and less virile side of Barber's romanticism and seems to

lack the conviction that the form implies. Or perhaps it is that he is less able to manipulate his intention in the orchestra in passages of Scherzo quality. The lightness comes out a bit thin although the scoring is clean and energetic.

This brings one to the fact that Barber's music is, with few exceptions, extremely self-serious. It is very little about *things*, that is to say, rarely descriptive or external in its effects. The songs, for instance, reveal only a slight concern for the world of objects, the canny, the clever, the material. This is not to imply they lack vividness or definition, but simply to reiterate that the quality of Barber's personality is exclusive in the nature of its experience. It is desire largely, and frustration severally, and almost everywhere it is the sensitive and penetrating design of melancholy. This element of frustration is almost entirely an emotional overtone of the work. It is very little related to the ordinary devices of technic – the breaking up of rhythmic lines and the harmonic acidity that gives to so much recent music its spasmodic, stop-and-go quality.

It may be interesting to quote the following passages from the *Second Essay*, with the main theme as it first appears in the work, and its subsequent transformation into a polytonal fugato. The fact that polytonality is used in the imitations (F# minor, A minor, E \flat minor, C minor), is not of any intrinsic interest here, but rather the fact that, as in most of Barber's music, such a device is used with complete naturalness.

The image displays a musical score for Samuel Barber's *Second Essay*. It is divided into four systems of staves, each with a different tempo and dynamic marking.

- System 1:** Tempo: *Andante, un poco mosso*. Dynamic: *mf dolce espressivo*. The music features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a long, sweeping phrase.
- System 2:** Tempo: *Molto allegro ed energico*. Dynamic: *Clar. f marcicissimo*. This system shows a rhythmic, driving passage for the Clarinet, with a Bassoon part below it marked *Bsn. f marc.*
- System 3:** This system includes parts for the English Horn (*Eng. Hn.*) and the Bassoon (*Bsn.*). The English Horn part is marked *p cresc.* and features a complex, polytonal texture.
- System 4:** This system includes parts for the Bassoon (*Bsn.*) and the Oboe (*Ob.*). The Oboe part is marked *f* and features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes.

Barber has never contested the theory that dissonance introduces tension and consonance relaxation. Many contemporary works employing extreme dissonance manage to close on a consonant chord, which arrives rather like a death-bed confession. The importance of consonance would seem to be in the value and variety of relaxations it makes possible within any given work. Things must *become* tense and *attain* repose. This tightening and relaxing of elements is the essential nature of movement.

Barber's *Violin Concerto*, for example, begins with the most innocent G-major chord. In the two very lyric first movements there is an almost extreme use of consonance. The theme of the first movement is open and expansive and very tender. In the more brilliant *perpetuo mobile* of the final movement, where tension and increased excitement are desired, the rhythmic scheme becomes much more complicated and the harmonic one correspondingly more stringent. Critics in general have naively labelled the last movement as "more modern," dissociating it in design from the rest of the work and failing to apprehend the fact that the dissonance involved is merely more necessary.

The current concern with dissonance threatens, at times, to become as orthodox and exclusive as the classic academy of consonance. It is striking in Barber's work that he is able to move from the simplicity of style in the *Violin Concerto*, in which the orchestra is kept purposely small, almost *concerto grosso* style so that the solo instrument does not have to apologize for its limited volume, to the complex compression of the *Symphony*. In this moderation and plasticity of style one is reminded of a passage in Forkel's book on Bach. In chamber music Bach played by preference the viola. "With this instrument he was, as it were, in the center of harmony, where he could hear and enjoy to the utmost what was going on on both sides of him."

There is an orthodox texture in the writing for chamber group. The first movement of the *String Quartet* and particularly the last movements of the *Cello Sonata* are self-excited rather than exciting, and less personal in their idiom than the early setting for voice and string quartet of Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. In these works the rhythmic personality is less original and animated, the melodic line less sure and persuasive.

It is unfortunate that Barber's songs, as well as contemporary songs in general, are not better known to serious musicians. They reveal an intimate, sensuous quality not always to be found in the larger works. Virgil Thomson referred on one occasion to Barber as "pure in heart."

The songs would seem to profess less purity and more heart. It must be remembered that Barber himself sings. Anyone who has heard him sing Monteverdi or Cavalli can realize that he has given close attention to a study of the "declamazione lirica" of the Renaissance. Due to this intimacy with the actual possibilities of the voice, he is not limited to the rules and regulations of the current cult of prosody, the literal imitation of spoken diction.

In this connection, he has been extremely careful in his choice of texts, finding in the works of James Joyce, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Emily Dickinson, Stephen Spender, a corresponding stress on the connotative rather than the dictionary meanings of language, the personal rather than the general speech idioms.

The melodic nature of the songs and their peculiarly personal final cadences are especially well contrived for the voice, although not many voices seem especially well contrived for Barber's songs. The following phrase is from *Rain Has Fallen*, to the poem of Joyce.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system includes a vocal line with lyrics "Rain has fallen all the day. O" and a piano accompaniment. The piano part features a rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes, with some notes beamed together and others separated by rests. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics "come among the laden trees: The" and the piano accompaniment. The piano part continues with similar sixteenth-note patterns, showing a melodic line in the right hand and a more harmonic accompaniment in the left hand.

In a most recent song, *Monks And Raisins*, set to a text by José García Villa, an unusual metre is employed with naturalness and wit. The entire song, with the exception of one measure, is in 7/8. The pulse of the song is almost reminiscent of Calypso rhythms, in somewhat the same fashion that honky-tonk rhythms are used in the piano piece, *Excursion*.

In the choruses, also, which show a distinct and happy influence of the freedom of the Monteverdian madrigals, there is a great deal of imagina-

tive writing for voices. *Anthony O'Daly*, from the *Reincarnations* of James Stephens, for mixed voices, a capella, shows extreme rhythmic independence of the parts, and a singular strength and clarity of style.

^{*più f*}
 On our mead - ows the dew Does not fall in the morn, For O Da - ly is dead,
^{*più f*}
 On our mead - ows the dew Does not fall in the morn, For O Da - ly is dead,
^{*più f*}
 On our mead - ows the dew Does not fall in the morn, For O Da - ly is dead,
^{*più f*}
 An - tho - ny, An - tho. ny, An - tho - ny, An -

In *A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map* (Stephen Spender), for unaccompanied men's chorus and kettledrums, the ominous and haunting quality of the chorus is achieved by the curious, indefinite pitch of the timpani against the voices. Effective use is made of timpani glissandi underneath a single melodic line. It is, with *Anthony O'Daly*, unique in its cumulative and elegiac desperation.

These two choruses, together with the *Second Essay* and the *Adagio for Strings*, contain Barber's finest writing; they are the essence of what is most moving and individual in his style. And it is in pieces such as these that one discovers that Barber's music is not "neo"-anything. It is actually and absurdly romantic in an age when romanticism is the catchword of fools and prophets. It is written intensely for strings in a period when music is written intensely for brass. Its intention is wholly musical. Its convention is rare, in that it establishes a personality before an idea, but a meaning before an effect. It is economical, not of necessity but of choice. It is cerebral only in the perspective of its craft, its logic and its form. It cannot properly be called "the answer" to anything, or the direction that music *must* take, for its distinction is entirely individual. It lacks casualness and often spontaneity, and sometimes fails in the incident of irony or humor. But it is composed. On the paper and in the ear, its design and its articulateness reveal a profound elegance of style, and a personal, anti-mechanical melancholy.

