

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14

Samuel Barber

When the Curtis Institute of Music opened its doors to students on October 1, 1924, Samuel Barber was second in line. It was a violinist who managed to pass through the portal before him: Max Aronoff, a future member of the Curtis String Quartet, the ensemble for which Barber would compose (a dozen years later) his String Quartet with its famous slow movement, often heard in its string orchestra setting as his Adagio for Strings. Barber's musical gifts had been apparent from an early age, and he was fortunate to have been born into a family that was attuned to recognize them. Although his parents were not professional musicians, his aunt, the contralto Louise Homer, was a mainstay at The Metropolitan Opera, and her husband, Sidney Homer, was well known as a composer of light Lieder of the parlor-song sort.

At Curtis Barber studied piano (with Isabelle Vengerova), composition (with Rosario Scalero), and voice (with the baritone Emilio de Gogorza, who was a colleague of Barber's aunt at The Met). While still a student there he produced several works that have entered the repertoire, including *Dover Beach* for baritone and string quartet (which he sang in its first commercial recording) and the orchestral *Overture to The School for Scandal* and *Music for a Scene from Shelley*. Thanks to a Rome Prize, he spent 1935–37 at the American Academy in that city completing, among other pieces, his *Symphony in One Movement*; it quickly received high-profile performances in Rome, Cleveland, and New York, as well as in the opening concert of the 1937 Salzburg Festival. The following year his reputation was cemented when Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony broadcast his Essay No. 1 and the Adagio for Strings; the latter would become one of the most recognized

compositions of the century. Barber was famous, and he was not yet 30 years old.

In 1939 he returned to Curtis, this time as composition professor, and he maintained that position until 1942, when he traded his affiliation there for one with the U.S. Army Air Forces. During this period Barber composed his Violin Concerto, which also grew out of a Curtis connection. Samuel Fels, of Fels Naptha soap fame, served on the school's board of directors, and in early 1939 he offered Barber a \$1,000 commission to write a violin concerto for Iso Briselli, a Curtis violin student he was interested in assisting. Barber accepted. He got to work on the piece that summer while staying in Sils-Maria, Switzerland. He moved on to Paris, where he hoped to complete the finale, but

IN SHORT

Born: March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died: January 23, 1981, in New York City

Work composed: summer 1939 through July 1940; revised in November 1948

World premiere: February 7, 1941, in Philadelphia, by The Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy, conductor, Albert Spalding, soloist; the revised version was introduced January 7, 1949, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitzky, conductor, Ruth Posselt, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: October 13, 1960, Leonard Bernstein, conductor, Aaron Rosand, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 7, 2015, David Zinman, conductor, Lisa Batiashvili, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 24 minutes

with the outbreak of war in August, Barber returned home to continue working on his concerto in America.

The finale was in part problematic because the violinist for whom the concerto was commissioned (and his violin coach) expressed displeasure with it. After provisional read-throughs, including by the respected violinist Oscar Shumsky, Barber showed his concerto to the eminent Albert Spalding, who was reputedly on the lookout for an

American piece to add to his concerto repertoire. Spalding signed on instantly, and it was he who introduced the work, with Eugene Ormandy conducting The Philadelphia Orchestra, following its extended gestation.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, snare drum, piano, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

In the Composer's Words

Barber contributed this comment to The Philadelphia Orchestra's program for the premiere of his Violin Concerto. Written in the third person, it refers to tempo markings that Barber would later simplify:

The Concerto for Violin and Orchestra was completed in July, 1940, at Pocono Lake, Pennsylvania, and is Mr. Barber's most recent work for orchestra. It is lyric and rather intimate in character and a moderate-sized orchestra is used: eight woodwinds, two horns, two trumpets, percussion, piano, and strings.

The first movement — *allegro molto moderato* — begins with a lyrical first subject announced at once by the solo violin, without any orchestral introduction. This movement as a whole has perhaps more the character of a sonata than concerto form. The second movement — *andante sostenuto* — is introduced by an extended oboe solo. The violin enters with a contrasting and rhapsodic theme, after which it repeats the oboe melody of the beginning. The last movement, a perpetual motion, exploits the more brilliant and virtuosic characteristics of the violin.

Barber, in 1944

