

# Notes on the Program

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## Adagio for Strings

### Samuel Barber

**A**lthough Samuel Barber's chamber music occupies a small chapter in his catalogue, it contains one of the most beloved compositions in all of American music, the slow movement that stands at the heart of his String Quartet, Op. 11, composed in 1936 and recast two years later as Adagio for Strings. As its opus number suggests, the String Quartet was an early work; Barber wrote it as an emerging composer during the course of travels in Italy and Austria. Before he arrived in Austria, he alerted Orlando Cole, cellist of the Curtis String Quartet, that he might have a new piece for the group to include in its upcoming European tour. It was not ready in time, but at least some of it moved ahead. On September 19, he wrote to Cole:

I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today — it is a knock-out! Now for a Finale.

Delays continued to beset the quartet. Barber reworked its finale over several years until the quartet was finally published in 1943. But the slow movement seemed perfectly crafted right from the start. It is unquestionably the heart of the work even though its materials are slight: a very slow and extended melody built from stepwise intervals, slightly varied through numerous repetitions, uncoiling over (or in the midst of) sustained chords that change with note-by-note reluctance, all of it building into a powerful climax at the high end of the instruments' ranges, and then quickly receding to the contemplative quietude that ultimately defines this musical expanse. An analysis of this movement reveals

little that qualifies as really remarkable — nothing, surely, that easily explains the emotional wallop it packs.

It is indeed “a knock-out,” as Barber reported, and it rose to superstardom when he arranged it as the stand-alone Adagio for Strings for five-part string orchestra (two violin, two viola, and cello sections), which was first heard on November 5, 1938, in a radio broadcast by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony. Barber recalled in 1960:

Imagine! [Walter] Primrose was the first violinist then, and Alfred Wallenstein was the principal cellist. Wallenstein has always said to me that he felt this was one of

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## IN SHORT

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

**Died:** January 23, 1981, in New York City

**Work composed:** as a string quartet in summer 1936, and expanded for string orchestra in 1938

**World premiere:** original string quartet setting, December 14, 1936, by the Pro Arte Quartet at the Villa Aurelia in Rome; orchestral version, November 5, 1938, in a radio broadcast by Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** June 28, 1939, Massimo Freccia, conductor

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** June 15, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 8 minutes

Toscanini's greatest performances. What luck for a young composer to have such a first performance!

Toscanini soon included the Adagio for Strings in his European and South American tour programs, and this sparked a debate among aesthetes over the merits of modernist vs. retrograde musical style, with Barber being deemed to represent the latter.

While interesting, the argument was moot, for Barber's Adagio for Strings promptly became an icon of American music. Particularly associated with grief-laden situations, it was aired in memorial concerts and broadcasts following the deaths of two American presidents — Franklin D. Roosevelt (in 1945) and John F. Kennedy (in 1963). It was excerpted for the sound tracks of films including *The Elephant Man* (1980) and *El norte* (1983), as well as Oliver Stone's 1986 *Platoon*, where it had heartrending impact. Even composers who would be cited as more forward-looking presences in American music had no trouble applauding the special qualities of Barber's

Adagio. In a 1982 BBC broadcast, Aaron Copland declared:

It's really well felt, it's believable, you see, it's not phoney. ... It comes straight from the heart, to use old-fashioned terms. The sense of continuity, the steadiness of the flow, the satisfaction of the arch that it creates from beginning to end. They're all very gratifying, satisfying, and it makes you believe in the sincerity which he obviously put into it.

William Schuman, not only a distinguished composer but also for many years the president of The Juilliard School and the first president of Lincoln Center, said in the same broadcast:

It's so precise emotionally. The emotional climate is never left in doubt. It begins, it reaches its climax, it makes its point, and it goes away. For me it's never a war-horse; when I hear it played I'm always moved by it.

**Instrumentation:** string orchestra.

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## Making Arrangements

After transcribing the Adagio of his String Quartet into the orchestral Adagio for Strings, Barber would go on to adapt it also for chorus, in 1967, as a setting of the Agnus Dei text of the Roman Catholic Mass. Beyond that he bestowed his blessing on arrangements made for organ by William Strickland, for clarinet choir by Lucien Cailliet, for woodwind ensemble by John O'Reilly, and for solo piano by Larry Rosen. Still, it is as a string quartet that this remarkable movement was conceived, and the string orchestra version is the one that listeners are most likely to encounter.

Barber, in the 1960s

