



Samuel BARBER

Violin concerto

Samuel Osborne Barber II (March 9, 1910 – January 23, 1981) was an American composer of orchestral, opera, choral, and piano music. He is one of the most celebrated composers of the 20th century; music critic Donal Henahan stated that "probably no other American composer has ever enjoyed such early, such persistent and such long-lasting acclaim."

Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, Barber was born into a distinguished family. His aunt, a contralto at the Metropolitan Opera, is known to have influenced Barber's interest in voice. Through his aunt, Barber was introduced to many great singers and songs. At a very early age, Barber became profoundly interested in music, and it was apparent that he had great musical talent and ability. He began studying the piano at the age of 6 and at age 7 composed his first work, *Sadness*, a 23-measure solo piano piece in C minor. Despite Barber's interest in music, his family wanted him to become a typical extroverted, athletic American boy. This meant, in particular, they encouraged his playing football. However, Barber was in no way a typical boy, and at the age of nine wrote to his mother that he was "meant to be a composer."

Indeed he was meant to be a composer as his legacy has left us with among the most impressive, passionate, and captivating works of the 20th century. One such example is his *Concerto for Violin*.

In 1939, Philadelphia industrialist Samuel Simeon Fels commissioned Barber to write a ***Concerto for Violin*** for Fels' ward, Iso Briselli, a graduate from the Curtis Institute of Music the same year as Barber, 1934. Barber accepted the commission and went to Switzerland to work on the concerto. Barber started working on the first two movements in Switzerland during the summer of 1939. He hoped to complete the concerto in the early fall to meet the October 1st deadline. His plans were interrupted, however, due to the impending war—all Americans were warned to leave Europe.

When he delivered the first two movements to Briselli in mid-October, they were received with great enthusiasm. He believed they were beautiful and eagerly awaited the finale. Barber wrote that Briselli seemed disappointed that they were not of virtuoso character—"a bit too easy." Barber worked diligently on the last movement, finishing it "in far from ideal circumstances" (his father's illness), and sent the violin part to Briselli about two months before the intended premiere.

Briselli asked Barber if he would rewrite the finale, but despite Briselli's prodding, Barber was dismissive of his suggestions and declined to alter it. This was a big disappointment for Briselli, who believed that with a substantial third movement, the work could stand as a great American violin concerto. Ultimately, Briselli decided to hold his ground regarding the finale and chose to forego the concerto's premiere and relinquish his claim on it.

In December 1939, Barber who was now teaching at the Curtis Institute and had asked Herbert Baumel, who was known to be an excellent sight reader, to study the finale for a couple of hours, then to join Barber in pianist Josef Hofmann's studio. After reviewing the music, Baumel went to the studio to discover an audience of Barber, Gian Carlo Menotti, Mary Louise Curtis Bok (founder of the Curtis Institute), and Edith Braun, a friend of Mrs. Bok. In the correspondence Barber writes, "My friends ... liked it, so did I."

In early 1940 there was a private performance by Baumel with the Curtis Institute Orchestra under Fritz Reiner. That performance brought the piece to the further attention of Eugene Ormandy, who soon scheduled its official premiere in a pair of performances by Albert Spalding with the Philadelphia Orchestra in the Academy of Music beginning on February 7, 1941. Those performances were followed on February 11, 1941 by a repeat performance in Carnegie Hall, and from that point, the piece rapidly entered the standard violin and orchestral repertoire, and has become one of the most frequently performed of all 20th-century concertos.