



Barber, Samuel (1910-1981)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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American composer Samuel Barber made an enduring contribution to the cultural life of the United States and the world, though he is also remembered for the spectacular failure of his opera *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Barber was born on March 9, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania, to a musical family; his aunt was the prominent mezzo-soprano Louise Homer. He began composing at the age of seven, and at fourteen became one of the first students of the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music.

During his studies at Curtis (1924-1932), he met the young Italian composer Gian Carlo Menotti (b. 1911), a fellow student who became his life partner and occasional artistic collaborator. The two men traveled extensively in Europe during the 1930s, a period that saw the composition of Barber's best known and most enduring work, the *Adagio for Strings* (1938). In 1943, Barber and Menotti bought a house in Mount Kisco, New York, which served for many years as their artistic retreat.

Although Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland had blazed a trail in the creation of a characteristically "American" mode of orchestral and vocal music in earlier decades, by the 1950s Barber had achieved a level of mainstream recognition virtually unprecedented for an American classical music composer working in a traditional European style.

With the end of World War II, he embarked on a succession of ambitious commissioned works, including the *Cello Concerto* (1947), the ballet *Medea* (1946) for Martha Graham, and the dance score *Souvenirs* (1952) for Lincoln Kirstein and the Ballet Society of New York.

This period also saw the composition of Barber's most memorable vocal music: *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1947), commissioned by soprano Eleanor Steber; *Hermit Songs* (1953), premiered by the young and then-unknown Leontyne Price; and the choral work *Prayers of Kierkegaard* (1954).

This string of artistic and critical triumphs culminated in the opera *Vanessa* (1958), for which Menotti wrote the libretto. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, *Vanessa* was acclaimed as the first American "grand" opera.

The leading role was originally offered to Maria Callas, who, preferring not to sing in English, declined; consequently Steber, long a champion of Barber's works, was chosen to be the first *Vanessa*. The opera won its composer the 1958 Pulitzer Prize for music.

Barber's *Piano Concerto* (1962) brought a second Pulitzer, but the stunning chain of successes came to a bitter end with, ironically, what should have been the crowning moment of his career. Following the acclaim that greeted *Vanessa*, Barber received a commission for a full-scale opera to mark the 1966 opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. The result was *Antony and Cleopatra*, with a libretto by Franco Zeffirelli after Shakespeare's play, and the lead role sung by Leontyne Price.



Samuel Barber in 1944.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, December 11, 1944.
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The elaborate production, designed and executed by Zeffirelli, was marred by numerous technological disasters; it also overwhelmed and obscured Barber's music, which most critics faulted as uncharacteristically weak and unoriginal.

Distressed by the fiasco, Barber left the United States soon thereafter and spent a number of years in seclusion in Europe, a period also marked by his estrangement from Menotti.

Barber died on January 23, 1981 in New York City.

In recent years, a revised version of *Antony and Cleopatra*, for which Menotti provided collaborative assistance, has enjoyed some success. Despite the disappointments of his later years, Barber nevertheless remains a major figure in American classical music, as the oft-performed *Adagio for Strings* so amply attests.

Bibliography

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