

A Continuing Reassessment of Samuel Barber

Five recent releases, several of which make substantial contributions to the Samuel Barber discography, prompt these reflections. **A Solstice disc, featuring pianist Lilia Boyadjieva, offers a number of pieces never before recorded, and is probably the most valuable CD solely devoted to Barber's keyboard music.** Virgin

Classics presents a lovely program of Barber's songs, sensitively and tastefully performed, augmented by works for string quartet. A rewarding disc on its own, it is, however, rendered superfluous by the magnificent two-CD set on Deutsche Grammophon, featuring Cheryl Studer, Thomas Hampson, and John Browning (see *Fanfare* 18:1, pp. 132-34). RCA Victor features violinist Kyoko Takezawa in yet another fine performance of the Violin Concerto, this one boasting a silky, liquid violin tone and an appropriately patrician conception. The disc also offers superb performances, led by today's pre-eminent Barber conductor Leonard Slatkin, of two of the composer's lesser compositions. Choral music accounts for some of Barber's most deeply moving and fully consummated works, featured here on an ASV disc, along with two pieces by his exact contemporary, William Schuman. comparison with the all-Barber choral program on Gamut, sung by the Cambridge University Chamber Choir (also discussed in the review cited above). The two choirs are comparable in size, style, and interpretive approach, so that a choice between the discs entails weighing one's interest in the disappointingly unmusical Schuman pieces and the never-before-recorded *God's Grandeur* of Barber against *A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map* and the excerpts from *Vanessa* and *Antony and Cleopatra* included on the Gamut disc. A Nuova Era release offers Italian pianist Dorella Sarlo in rather labored, unidiomatic renditions of several American piano works, among which Barber's *Souvenirs* is of subordinate importance. (Of more significance is the large group of Bernstein's *Anniversaries*--short sketches written for friends and relatives, many of which found their way into larger works, most prominently *Age of Anxiety* and *Mass*. Copland's *Four Piano Blues*, introspective character pieces that draw upon "bluesy" turns of phrase in the most remote, abstract way, are played here in an uncomprehending, literal manner, without a trace of "swing." The late [1972] *Night Thoughts*, ostensibly a homage to Ives, are more reminiscent of Messiaen in their groping, unfocused ruminativeness -- a quality quite uncharacteristic of Copland in general.)

Auditioning this cornucopia of music by Barber has been illuminating and deeply pleasurable. The five discs include of the genres in which he worked, and comprise almost half entire output, the earliest piece dating from age 13, and the latest -- his penultimate completed work -- from age 67. **The extent of international interest in Barber's music is illustrated by this review, which addresses a French disc featuring a Bulgarian pianist who lives in France;** an English disc that features a (presumably) English baritone and string quartet; a disc featuring a major American orchestra and conductor, with soloists from Japan

Traduction française des éléments principaux :

“... le disque avec la pianiste Lilia Boyadjieva, propose un certain nombre de pièces jamais enregistrées à ce jour, et constitue probablement le CD le plus important dédié à la musique pour piano de Barber.

“... Three Sketches et ... Fresh from West Chester ... Découvrir ces morceaux de jeunesse, joués par Boyadjieva sans le moindre soupçon de condescendance, fournit un point de départ pour apprécier les morceaux qui vont suivre juste après ...

“... Même la fameuse Sonate pour Piano de 1949, jouée par Lilia Boyadjieva avec une combinaison extraordinaire de force et de délicatesse, est une des meilleures interprétations jamais enregistrées ...”

and England; an English disc that features an English chorus; and an Italian disc featuring an Italian pianist.

Particularly exciting is the presence on both the Solstice and the ASV releases of pieces-- mostly recorded for the first time -- that are not included on Barber's official work-list. Most of them were written during the composer's youth, but are not at all dismissable as juvenilia. In addition, the performances discussed here are mostly quite good, in many cases revealing a sense of comfort, confidence, and polish suggesting that the musicians have not just learned the music for these recordings, but have been digesting it for some time. In other words, these are not "first-generation performances," as are most recordings of American music, but, rather, show the effects of the music's increasing general familiarity.

To a devotee of program notes, the annotators' various attempts to conceptualize the 20th-century American music scene and Barber's role within it are fascinating. The annotators of the respective discs are: *Fanfare's* own erudite, Paris-based Martin Anderson; Michael Oliver, who was not previously known to me; Barbara Heyman, author of a comprehensive biography of the composer, in which voluminous research is counterbalanced by a timidity about assessing matters of meaning and significance characteristic of American musicologists; the estimable and venerable Wilfrid Mellers, a delightfully provocative English musicologist with a particular interest in American music, and one who is not at all timid about making assessments of meaning and significance, whose deftly-expressed speculations are at times infuriatingly wrongheaded and at others brilliantly acute; and Mauro Balma, an Italian commentator not previously known to me.

The notes by these writers indicate that from today's vantage point, Barber's place among the pantheon of American composers and the themes that underlie his creative output are not as well understood or appreciated as is the quality of individual works. This is partly the result of a misconception -- especially prevalent in Europe -- that the dominant reference points in American music are Charles Ives and John Cage, two characters who, in reality, exerted relatively little influence on the vast majority of serious American composers. (Barber himself said, "I can't bear Ives," describing him as "an amateur, a hack, who didn't put pieces together well.") From the perspective of such commentators, Barber looms among the intellectuals from the East Coast, the eccentric experimentalists from the West Coast, and the various purveyors of a mythic American landscape as the conservative who remained loyal to the European late-romantic tradition. This may be true as far as it goes, but it is an obvious oversimplification. Far more relevant and pointed is the question: Among all the American traditionalists who forged their own identities without abandoning the familiar language of European late-romanticism, what was unique and special about Barber? Since his death in 1981, work after work has gradually entered the "standard repertoire," where *de facto* "masterpiece" status is conferred. Yet there has not been any serious reassessment of Barber's overall significance as an artist.

Further barriers to a deeper, fuller understanding are biographical factors that do not play well from the perspective of the "rugged pioneer" view of American culture-- for example, that Barber was a "sissy," born to an affluent family with influential musical connections ("with silver spoons spilling from his mouth and prizes magnetically gravitating towards him," in Mellers' words). Afforded the opportunity to concentrate on cultivating both his talent and his network of social contacts, he won the encouragement of wealthy benefactors and the

enthusiastic support of many of the greatest musicians of the day while he was still in his mid-twenties. The assumption is that Barber "had it easy," and therefore didn't "pay his dues" as a "suffering artist." Commentaries on Barber often display this prejudice in their patronizing or begrudging attitudes. Consider the tortuous ambivalence reflected in Mellers' favorable description of the *Adagio for Strings*: "Finely spun string cantilena gives to the harmonies' opulence a frail pathos, so that one is involved in a genuine, not Hollywooden, tear-jerker, but is never emotionally bullied." Elsewhere, Mellers describes him as "a composer usually distinguished by charm and discretion" -- a description clearly based more on Barber's social image than on the character of his music.

What emerges from deeper acquaintance with Barber's entire output is a musical personality of great tenderness, sensitivity, a fragile vulnerability -- a "hothouse" personality, perhaps. Supporting this temperament is the hand of a meticulous craftsman who tolerated no *gaucherie* in workmanship or taste, regardless of a work's scope or level of ambition. It is this latter quality that is most striking in the piano pieces dating from the composer's mid-teen years: *Three Sketches* and the two pieces that comprise *Fresh from West Chester*. Anderson's commentary leads one to expect childish self-mockery and awkward satire, not to mention some crudeness and immaturity in execution. But what one discovers are "salon" pieces that almost anticipate *Souvenirs* in their irresistible "prettiness," their refined taste, and their sophisticated workmanship -- quite astonishing for a 15-year-old! Discovering these early pieces, played without a scintilla of condescension by Boyadjieva, provides a point of departure from which to view the pieces that soon followed, such as the Op. 1 *Serenade* and the *Three Songs*, Op. 2.

Barber's artistic mentor from his childhood well into his maturity was the composer Sidney Homer, who happened to be his uncle (and how illuminating it might be to encounter some of his music on recording!). Homer successfully pointed his nephew toward two ideals: one was the imperative of being true to one's inner voice, and the other was the fundamental importance of impeccable craftsmanship. How closely Barber heeded this guidance may be seen in the works he composed during his twenties-- e.g. the *Songs* of Opp. 2, 10, and 13, the *Choruses*, Op. 8, and the *Reincarnations*-- works in which he courageously exposed the tenderness and vulnerability of his artistic soul. In this music there is often a strain of sadness, but a sweetness and a sense of security as well. *Dover Beach*, Barber's first work of true greatness, composed when he was 21, is atypical and precocious in the wholehearted conviction with which it embraces Matthew Arnold's bitterness, despair, and yearning for the security of the past. In its emotional content, *Dover Beach* anticipates the psychological and emotional themes -- made explicit in the texts that he chose -- that Barber developed more fully during his maturity.

In the music he composed during his twenties, Barber also gave voice to spiritual sentiments, but always within a humanistic context. As Mellers acutely observes, "The texts he set were seldom overtly religious, though they often celebrated the presumptive innocence of child or peasant... Barber was on the mark in believing that the truth of his religious sensibility was inseparable from his awareness of the common heart of humanity." An example of this is his setting of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur," which Barber chose not to include among his numbered works. Written at about the same time as the three *Reincarnations*, it contains a musical device that also appears in "Anthony O'Daly." Although not without its magical moments, *God's Grandeur* does not impress me as achieving the same consistency of

inspiration as does the contemporaneous triptych, although Mellers considers it to be Barber's finest choral work,

Barber's creative gift was so literary in nature, so focused on mood and emotion, that he seemed almost incapable of mastering the techniques of organic growth essential in constructing large works of absolute music, unless guided in some way by a literary point of reference. In fact, few of Barber's totally abstract works can be considered fully successful artistically (a notable exception is the Symphony No. 1), although the irresistible appeal of his melodic ideas often compensated for compositional weaknesses, enabling such works to achieve considerable popular success. Two clear examples are the *String Quartet* and the *Violin Concerto*. In these works Barber seems to be floundering out of his element, as lovely lyrical ideas are linked together seemingly arbitrarily, in search of a plausible formal design. Such pieces would be unacceptable were it not for the appeal of the material itself. Unacceptable seemed to have been Barber's own verdict for the two *Interludes* for piano, composed right after *Dover Beach*, and recorded here for the first time. Perhaps their unmistakable roots in the Brahms *Intermezzi* made him feel that they did not qualify as fully mature compositions. I suppose this is true, but the first of the two-- more than three times as long as the second-- is, as Martin Anderson observes, "Brahms seen through Barber's eyes," and makes a strong, lasting impression.

During his early thirties, perhaps moved to self-doubt by criticisms that he was overlooking compositional trends then engaging the attention of others, Barber began to explore some of these musical languages, deviating considerably from the elegiac romanticism that characterized most of his previous work. Perhaps the most notable success from this period is *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, in which the quintessentially Barberian theme of nostalgic longing for the sweetness and innocence of childhood is articulated through the more harmonically acerbic language of Stravinsky-as-Americanized-by-Copland. But many of these pieces -- the *Excursions* for piano, the *Capricorn Concerto*, the *Cello Concerto* (which followed each other in sequence) -- lack the very individuality, conviction, and sincerity that so distinguished Barber's earlier work, although each displays the composer's impeccable refinement and sensitivity to nuance. **Even the highly-touted *Piano Sonata of 1949*, played with an extraordinary combination of both power and delicacy by Lilia Boyadjieva in one of the finest readings on record,** remains an ultimately unsatisfying work, the artistic whole of which is less than the sum of its rather incongruous parts.

Then, during the early 1950s, Barber found himself again, integrating an angular chromaticism retained from his recent explorations into a more authentic, expressive, and mature personal language. In these later works, the tenderness and vulnerability return, but more and more often expressed with irony, defensiveness, even decadence and self-pity, as it became increasingly clear during the unsentimental, self-consciously modernistic 1960s that the very success he had won at such a young age now made Barber seem like an overgrown, spoiled child. Yet, perversely, the bitterness and disappointment of his later years lent the best works from this period -- *Andromache's Farewell*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Lovers* -- an emotional complexity and ambiguity missing from the works that made him famous. These are probably Barber's least understood masterpieces. In an interview, Barber made a comment that seems from today's vantage point to reflect with some poignancy the way he saw himself at that time: "It is said that I have no style at all but that doesn't matter. I just go on doing, as they say, my thing. I believe this takes a certain courage."

Unfortunately, during his final years, self-doubt and self-pity seem to have destroyed Barber's creative impetus, so that his last pieces, such as the *Ballade* for piano, a nocturnal reflection in the manner of Scriabin and Bloch, seem unable to take flight at all. Boyadjieva does her best to imbue the *Ballade* with some intensity, but to no avail. In Martin Anderson's words, the work "ends, as Barber's life did, in unemphatic, quiet pain."

It is unlikely that Barber could have foreseen the revival of interest in his music that followed almost immediately upon his passing. Somehow, a composer's death seems to neutralize much of the nastiness that surrounds him while still among the living, so that the music itself can then achieve a clearer profile than the person, rather than the other way around. Today, Barber's entire *oeuvre* is available on recordings, many of the highest artistic caliber. Of how many other 20th-century composers can this be said? Many of his works have entered the active repertoire, a process that appears to be continuing. Today there are at least a dozen recordings of the *Violin Concerto*, about ten of the *Overture to the School for Scandal*, about eight of *Knoxville*. It will be fascinating to watch the evolution of critical and popular opinion as more and more of his works achieve broader exposure.

BARBER: *Three Sketches. Fresh from West Chester. Interludes I and II. Four Excursions. Sonata for Piano. Nocturne. After the Concert. Ballade.* Lilia Boyadjieva, piano. SOLSTICE SOCD-145 [DDD]; 65:29. Produced by Yvette Carbou. (Fax: (33) 4 68 48 55 41)

BARBER: *Serenade for String Quartet, Op. 1. Three Songs, Op. 2. Dover Beach, Op. 3. Three Songs, Op. 10. String Quartet, Op. 11. Three Songs, Op. 45. Misc. Songs* (see below). Thomas Allen, baritone; Roger Vignoles, piano; Endellion String Quartet. VIRGIN CLASSICS 7243 5 45033 2 [DDD]; 63:35. Produced by Andrew Keener. Misc. Songs: *Sure on This Shining Night, Op. 13, No. 3; Nocturne, Op. 13, No. 4; Solitary Hotel, Op. 41, No. 4.*

BARBER: *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. Concerto for Cello and Orchestra. Capricorn Concerto.* Leonard Slatkin conducting the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra; Kyoko Takezawa, violin; Steven Isserlis, cello; Jacob Barb, flute; Peter Bowman, oboe; Susan Slaughter, trumpet. RCA VICTOR 09026-68283-2 [DDD]; 64:42. Produced by Joanna Nickrenz.

BARBER: *Two Choruses, Op. 8. Agnus Dei. God's Grandeur, Reincarnations, Op. 16. Two Choruses, Op. 42. Misc. Choral Settings* (see below). W. SCHUMAN: *Mail Order Madrigals . Perceptions.* Peter Broadbent conducting the Joyful Company of Singers. ASV CD-DCA-939 [DDD]; 66:23. Produced by John H. West. Misc. Choral Settings: *Heaven-Haven, Op. 13, No. 1; Sure on This Shining Night, Op. 13, No. 2; The Monk and his Cat, Op. 29, No. 8.*

BARBER: *Souvenirs.* BERNSTEIN: *Five Anniversaries. Thirteen Anniversaries.* COPLAND: *Night Thoughts. Four Piano Blues.* Dorella Sarlo, piano. NUOVA ERA 7195 [DDD]; 71:58. Produced by Luciano Stella (Audium)

Walter Simmons.
© *Fanfare* 1997