

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14 Samuel Barber

Scored for: solo violin and an orchestra of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, snare drum, piano, and strings. Performance time: Approximately 25 minutes.

Samuel Barber was one of America's most admired composers throughout his career, which spanned the middle decades of the twentieth century. It was once common to hear Barber disparaged as an anachronistic Romantic, an artist out of touch with the modernist currents of his time. Barber's compositions have withstood the test of time, however, and it is the very qualities that once seemed so hopelessly old-fashioned—their traditional tonal harmonies and unabashedly nineteenth-century style of orchestration and musical rhetoric—that have preserved his best works in the concert repertoire.

Barber's Romanticism is nowhere more evident than in his Violin Concerto. This was the composer's first piece for solo instrument and orchestra (he would later write concertos for cello and piano), and the largest orchestral composition he had written so far in his young career. The work had its genesis in a commission from Samuel Fels, a businessman who had made a fortune as a soap manufacturer. Fels also was a trustee of the Curtis Institute of Music, where Barber was one of the charter students, and took it upon himself to sponsor a young violinist from Odessa, a former child prodigy named Iso Briselli.

Barber knew Briselli at Curtis and later encountered him again in New York, where both had gone to pursue their careers. The composer was already establishing an important reputation with works such as his First Essay for Orchestra and the famous Adagio for Strings. In the spring of 1939, Fels offered Barber a thousand dollars, a sizeable fee at that time, to write a concerto for Briselli. Barber agreed and composed most of the concerto during the summer and autumn of that year. In the end, however, Briselli expressed dissatisfaction with the piece and surrendered his right to its first performance. Instead, the violinist Albert Spalding played the premiere with the Philadelphia Orchestra early in 1941.

The work is cast in the venerable concerto design of three movements in a fast-slow-fast arrangement, though the opening Allegro is more relaxed in tone than either tradition or its tempo indication might suggest. The composer announces the flowing principal theme of this first movement at once, assigning it to the solo instrument. The clarinet introduces a second idea, more sprightly in character, before the violin takes it up. Both themes recur, transfigured in various ways as the movement unfolds. A full-throated re-statement of the principal subject by the orchestra provides the emotional climax.

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The slow movement begins with a long-breathed melody sung by the oboe. Soon, the violin counters with a new theme, whose extension occupies the central portion of the movement. The initial melody finally returns in the voice of the concerto's featured instrument.

In marked contrast to the lyricism of the first two movements, the third is an athletic romp featuring moto perpetuo figuration for the solo violin. With angular melodic lines, brittle textures, sharp off-beat accents from the orchestra, and a touch of sardonic humor, it is not only more energetic but also more modern in sound than what has gone before.