

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14 - Samuel Barber

SAMUAL BARBER 1910 - 1981

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Presto in moto perpetuo

When he was nine years old, Samuel Barber wrote the following letter to his mother:- "Notice to Mother and nobody else. Dear Mother, I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Now don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now without any nonsense. To begin with I was not meant to be an athlete (sic). I was meant to be a composer, and will be I'm sure. I'll ask you one more thing;- don't ask me to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football. Please - Sometimes I've been worrying about this so much that it makes me mad (not very). Love, Sam Barber "

From such humble beginnings Barber did indeed rise to become, along with Copland, one of the best loved and most frequently performed American composers of his generation.

The violin concerto is a relatively early work, most of which was composed in Switzerland during the summer of 1939. The finale, however, had to wait until his return to his native Pennsylvania after all Americans were advised to leave Europe in August of that year, because of the impending Nazi invasion of Poland. When the work was eventually completed the sponsor declared the last movement to be too difficult, and demanded his money back. Barber, having already spent all of the fee in Europe, had to call in the celebrated violinist Oscar Shumsky to demonstrate that this was not in fact the case.

The concerto is quite clearly divided between the first two lyrical movements and the explosively energetic finale. The opening allegro, in G major, is dominated by the long expansive melody which the soloist unfolds right at the outset, without any sort of orchestral introduction. The most important subsidiary idea is a clarinet tune with a short-long rhythmic stress, sounding almost Scottish in its inflections. These two themes feature in the central development section, and after a full recapitulation and short accompanied cadenza, (Barber is known to have had an aversion to conventional cadenzas), both tunes also appear in the quiet coda.

The long, beautiful, and dark toned principal melody of the second movement is given in turn to oboe, cello, clarinet, violins and horn before the solo violin makes its first entry. The soloist dominates the more agitated middle section, which ends with another accompanied cadenza, and then remains in the foreground during the impassioned return of the first section.

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Barber's own program note for the first performance in 1941 contains something of an understatement:- "The last movement, a perpetual motion, exploits the more brilliant and virtuoso characteristics of the violin". In fact what the listener hears are racing triplet figures which are maintained for page after page by the soloist, only interrupted by driving off-beat accents or cross-rhythms in the orchestra. The movement is all rhythmic drive, with the soloist's final gear change from triplets into semiquavers near the end significantly increasing the excitement and impetus.

Barber revised the score in 1948 and the definitive version was published the following year, since when, together with the well-known "Adagio for Strings", it has become one of the composer's most frequently performed works.