

## SAMUEL BARBER

### Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14

Imperial Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra; William Strickland, conducting;  
Wolfgang Stavonhagen, violin

### First Symphony in One Movement, Op. 9

Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra; William Strickland, conducting

Samuel Barber (born West Chester, Pa., March 9, 1910) is one composer whose name inevitably turns up on any “ten best” list of twentieth century American composers. Even those who may object strenuously to Barber’s essentially romantic aesthetic find it all but impossible to omit his name from any roll call of our finest composers. This has been true since the late 1930’s, when Barber achieved his first great successes after his Curtis Institute and *Prix de Rome* days with such romantic scores as the *Adagio for Strings*, *First Essay for Orchestra* and *First Symphony*. It still holds true in 1960 when his best work of the intervening years is considered, works such as *A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map* for male chorus and timpani (1940), *Knoxville—Summer of 1915* for soprano and orchestra (1947), the *Piano Sonata* (1949), and *Prayers of Kierkegaard* for chorus, soprano and orchestra (1954). These compositions have shown Barber’s capacity for maintaining expressive intensity, integrity of craftsmanship and stylistic development, in spite of fluctuations in prevailing musical fashion, ranging from folklorism through neo-classicism to post-Webern serialism and beyond. Barber has tried his hand to some degree in all three of these styles in the *Excursions* for piano (1944), the *Capricorn Concerto* (1944), and the *Piano Sonata* (1949); but he has never allowed mere device to become an end in itself. While it is evident that Barber underwent a stylistic crisis during the period 1939-44, the evidence of the *Piano Sonata* and *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, as well as the final act of the opera *Vanessa*, bear witness to Barber’s successful integration of “modern techniques” with his own essentially romantic mode of musical expression. At his best, Barber has been able to make classical discipline with its formal devices work *for* him rather than the other way about. Indeed, what more can one ask of a first class work of art than that it display true integration of form and expression and a content worthy of that effort?

Both of the Samuel Barber works recorded here show some evidence of the style problem that he was coping with during 1939-42. He had his first great successes as an out-and-out neo-romantic. From 1939 on, he could either take the easy way and continue to turn out “effective” music to a sure-fire formula, or he could face the fact that genuine expressive growth and a growth in stylistic sophistication are to some extent interdependent. Hence we find such extreme diversity in Barber’s 1944 scores as represented by the folklorism of the *Excursions* and the austere neo-classicism of the *Capricorn Concerto*. In the *Violin Concerto* of 1939 and the 1942 revision of the *First Symphony* of 1936, we experience at firsthand Barber’s struggle to achieve a musical language flexible enough to encompass all the devices of twentieth century musical technique without betraying his essential creative self.

Barber’s own description of his *First Symphony* holds true in equal measure for the 1936 and 1942 versions: “The form of my *Symphony in One Movement* is a synthetic treatment of the four-movement classical symphony. It is based on three themes of the initial *Allegro non troppo*, which retain throughout the work their fundamental character. The *Allegro* opens with the exposition of the main theme, a more lyrical second theme, and a closing theme. After a brief development of the three themes, instead of the usual recapitulation, the first theme, in diminution, forms the basis of a scherzo section (*Vivace*). The second theme (oboe over muted strings) then appears in augmentation in an extended *Andante tranquillo*. An intense crescendo introduces the finale which

is a short passacaglia based on the first theme (introduced by the violoncelli and contrabassi), over which, together with figures from other themes, the closing theme is woven, thus serving as a recapitulation for the entire symphony.”

Bernardino Molinari conducted the world premiere of Barber’s *First Symphony* at a Rome Augusteo concert on December 13, 1936, and Artur Rodzinski introduced it to America with the Cleveland Orchestra a month later. That summer he also programmed it at the Salzburg festival. In 1942, Barber subjected the scherzo section to complete revision, giving the diminished version of his basic theme much more rhythmic urgency through the use of dotted figuration. He also increased the dramatic tension of this episode through the use of more dense and dissonant textures. The result was to transform the character of the entire Symphony so that it now has more in common with those of post-1942 than with those of pre-1940. Bruno Walter introduced the new version with the Philadelphia Orchestra on February 18, 1944.

While the Symphony is intensely dramatic in expression, Barber’s *Violin Concerto* is almost wholly lyrical. The Concerto was completed in 1939 and was premiered by the late Albert Spalding with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra on February 7, 1941.

The *Allegro moderato* first movement opens in Barber’s most, lyrico-arioso manner, then passes on to a secondary theme of somewhat skipping iambic character—but not aggressively so. The lyricism becomes more intense and somber in the A-B-A *Andante* slow movement, but with the finale *Presto in moto perpetuo*, the soloist has something more to do than make beautiful sounds. Here he must sail full tilt through subtly irregular rhythms and through an occasional thicket of dissonant texture. In a sense, then, this *Violin Concerto* of Barber’s can be said to represent the stylistic alternatives faced by the composer in 1939 and described above.

Notes by DAVID HALL

Like the renowned Leopold Stokowski, his predecessor at St. Bartholomew’s Church in New York City, William Strickland’s professional beginnings are rooted in the music of the church and especially the organ. His artistic growth has paralleled Stokowski’s in the manner in which he has devoted most of his mature musical life to the commissioning and performance of contemporary music. Strickland’s work with the venerable New York Oratorio Society has brought him considerable recognition as a choral conductor; in addition he has served as a founder-conductor of the NYA Little Orchestra, conductor of the Nashville Symphony and “guested” extensively in Germany and Austria.

*(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*