



Samuel Osborne Barber 1910-1981

NOTE TO STUDENTS: Words in **yellow** can be found in the glossary which is a separate document.

Samuel Barber was an American composer, pianist, conductor, singer, and music educator, and one of the most **celebrated** composers of the 20th century. One music critic said, "Probably no other American composer has ever enjoyed such early, such persistent, and such long-lasting **acclaim**." Barber was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, thirty miles from Philadelphia. He began playing piano when he was six and began composing when he was seven. His mother was an amateur pianist herself, and she helped him write down some of his earliest works. His father was a prominent doctor, and both parents had hopes that Sam would attend Princeton and become a doctor like his father. Sam had other plans.

His mother's sister, his Aunt Louise Homer, was a famous opera singer, and her husband Sidney became Sam's **mentor**, since he, himself, was a composer of note. He helped Sam until his death in 1953...the loss of that dear uncle effected Sam deeply.

On the right is a photo of Sidney and Louise Homer posing with fellow composer Gian-Carlo Menotti and Barber.



Barber loved opera and remembered his first experience vividly...he was only six when he attended the Metropolitan Opera in New York City to see Verdi's *Aida*. His Aunt Louise sang the role of Amneris and the role of Radames was sung by the world-famous tenor Caruso. This love of opera and of singing undoubtedly shaped his future as a composer. He wrote beautiful melodies and lush harmonies, and was labeled a "neo-Romantic," a label he didn't appreciate.

The time-line for music history is Early Music (before 1600), the Baroque Era (1600-1750), the Classical Era (1750-1825), The Romantic Era (1825-1900), and the Modern Era (1900-present).

Those modern composers living and working after 1900 were often “pigeon-holed” as Neo-Classical composers, Neo-Romantic composers, etc. (“Neo” meaning “new.”) Many modern composers didn’t want people to make such associations of their work with the past, since they were striving to strike out on new paths. However, this label has stuck with Barber.

In his lifetime composers were experimenting with sounds, with mathematical approaches to composition, to clashes, crashes, screeches, screams...the electronic age pushed the musical envelope to the extreme. But not Barber. He once said to a friend:

Skyscrapers, subways, and train lights play no part in the music I write. Neither am I at all concerned with the musical values inherent in geometric **celebrations**. My aim is to write good music that will be comprehensible to as many people as possible, instead of music heard only by small, snobbish musical societies in the large cities...The universal basis of artistic spiritual communication by means of art is through the emotions.

He maintained this approach throughout his life, and a few years before his death he was asked in an interview just how he was able to resist the wide variety of styles and forms of the last fifty years. His reply was, “Why haven’t I changed? Why should I? There’s no reason music should be difficult for an audience to understand, is there?”

When his parents realized that he was not going to become a doctor, they sought the best musical education for him that they could possibly find. When he was a freshman in high school, he auditioned for Harold Randolph, the director of the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Randolph immediately saw his talent and recommended that Barber drop out of school and study music and composition full time! So, at the tender age of 14, he entered the Curtis Institute of Music and was one of its charter members as only the second person to enroll in that new school. (He actually continued to go to high school during the week, but he commuted to Philadelphia on Fridays to study at Curtis.)



Barber with composer friends Copland and Bernstein

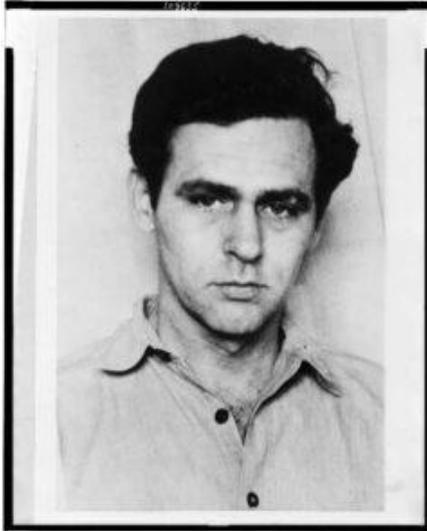
His music was immediately embraced by such giants in the music world as Arturo Toscanini (toes-skah-KNEE-nee) and Bruno Walter (Vahl-ter) who were both world-renowned orchestral conductors. He had great success throughout his career. He was one of the few 20th-century composers who did little else but compose. He didn’t perform often, and although he was an accomplished pianist and singer, he didn’t write books, serve on boards of musical organizations, organize festivals, etc.

Barber was a perfectionist and would sometimes take long periods of time to publish a work. He ended up publishing a small number of well-crafted pieces that spanned the musical **spectrum**: one concerto each for violin, for cello and for piano. He wrote one cello sonata, one piano sonata, one set of piano pieces for solo piano, one set of piano pieces for piano duet, one string quartet, one woodwind quintet, one piece for wind ensemble, one chamber opera, and a long list of songs for voice and piano. He actually wrote two symphonies, became **disenchanted** with the second one and destroyed it. However, after his death a single copy emerged from the Schirmer publishing house, and it is still performed today. He also wrote two operas and several larger works for voice and orchestra, plus other orchestral works.

Sure on This Shining Night

We will begin with some of his songs for voice and piano, starting with *Sure on This Shining Night*. In case you are interested in knowing more, some interesting remarks were found on this website: <https://www.debisimons.com/sure-on-this-shining-night/> However, you aren't required to go to this website.

Barber was at his most Romantic and impassioned when he was composing for singers, probably because he was a fine singer himself. He was fond of poetry from a young age, and according to friends, he had books of poetry all over his house. He chose a poem of James Agee's and set a portion of it for this song.



A photo of the poet and writer James Agee

LYRICS:

Sure on this shining night
Of star-made shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me
This side the ground.
The late year lies down the north.
All is healed, all is health.
High summer holds the earth.
Hearts all whole.
Sure on this shining night
I weep for wonder wand'ring far alone
Of shadows on the stars.

It is clear that the night sky is shining with stars which cast shadows. "This side the ground" probably refers to life, as opposed to death, which would be on the other side of the ground. "The late year lies down the north" probably means that winter is past and "High summer holds the earth." Since "All is healed, all is health" perhaps the poet is also in the summer of his life, and not an old man. Why is he weeping? It is hard to say. Is he weeping at the beauty of life, or at its **brevity**, or both? It is hard to say. James Agee's father was killed in a car wreck when

James was only seven years old, so he understood the brevity of life, even though he was only 26 years old when he wrote this poem. Tragically Agee also died young, at the age of 46.

There is an amusing story told by Barber about this song. Apparently in 1979 Samuel Barber had just moved into a new apartment in New York City and had gotten a different phone number. He was away from home and needed to call there and speak to his houseguest, the composer Gian-Carlo Menotti, but he couldn't remember the new number. So he called **directory assistance**, but the operator was reluctant to give out that information; she apparently thought that he was some celebrity stalker and not actually Barber himself. But she had an idea. She told him she was very fond of "Sure on This Shining Night," and could Barber sing the opening phrase? He did so and was rewarded with the phone number.

Here is the link to this beautiful song. Take a listen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOq5ce6iii8>

Hermit Songs

A popular work among singers is Barber's *Hermit Songs*, based on **anonymous** poems and scribbles by Irish monks in the margins of illustrated bibles during the 8th-13th centuries. (A hermit is someone who lives alone, usually as part of a religious requirement.) The work is a **song cycle**, containing ten songs, and was premiered in 1953 at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The singer was soprano Leontyne (lee-own-TEEN) Price and Barber himself was at the piano.

Of the ten songs, we will focus only on *The Heavenly Banquet*, *The Crucifixion*, *The Monk and His Cat*, and *Desire for Hermitage*. Notice the dotted rhythms in *The Heavenly Banquet*, and the bouncing from high to low in the piano accompaniment. In *The Crucifixion*, Christ is referred to as a swan. A "black swan" is a term used in financial markets. It refers to an unexpected and dramatic event; for example, the coronavirus pandemic is described as a black swan, which caused the stock market to fall rapidly. The greatest black swan in human history is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It was wholly unexpected, and it changed everything. It demonstrated that there is life after death.

As you listen to this song, notice Barber's use of the quick high notes which are **dissonant**...the interval of a **tritone**, which is three whole steps. This interval is quite unstable (an example is b-f on the piano) and in the Middle Ages this interval was considered to be Satanic. *The Monk and His Cat* requires legato singing, and calls to mind a silky cat that loves to be petted. Can you hear meows in the 2-note slurs of the piano? In *Desire for Hermitage* Barber sets a bleak landscape since an Irish **hermitage** is usually in an isolated place. Notice how the notes dwindle to almost nothing at the end on the words "Alone I came into the world - alone I shall go from it."

Here is a link to their recording of the complete work, but we will be listening to only a few of the songs – open the link and skip to the minute mark next to the title of the song. Then scroll down to each song and follow the lyrics as you listen to the recording.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iXoqfoxK1

The Heavenly Banquet (05:35)

I would like to have the men of Heaven in my own house;
with vats of good cheer laid out for them.

I would like to have the three Mary's,
their fame is so great.

I would like people from every corner of Heaven.

I would like them to be cheerful in their drinking.

I would like to have Jesus sitting here among them.

I would like a great lake of beer for the King of Kings.

I would like to be watching Heaven's family

Drinking it through all eternity.

The Crucifixion (6:50)

At the cry of the first bird

They began to crucify Thee, O Swan!

Never shall **lament** cease because of that.

It was like the parting of day from night.

Ah, sore was the suffering borne

By the body of Mary's Son,

But sorer still to Him was the grief

Which for His sake

Came upon His Mother.

The Monk and His Cat (10:05)

Pangur, white Pangur,

How happy we are

Alone together, Scholar and cat.

Each has his own work to do daily;

For you it is hunting, for me, study.

Your shining eye watches the wall;

My feeble eye is fixed on a book.

You rejoice when your claws entrap a mouse;

I rejoice when my mind **fathoms** a problem.

Pleased with his own art

Neither hinders the other;

Thus we live ever

Without **tedium** and envy.

Pangur, white Pangur,
How happy we are,
Alone together, Scholar and cat.

The Desire of Hermitage (13:15)

Ah! To be all alone in a little cell
with nobody near me;
beloved that pilgrimage before the last pilgrimage to death.
Singing the passing hours to cloudy Heaven;
Feeding upon dry bread and water from the cold spring.
That will be an end to evil when I am alone
in a lovely little corner among tombs
far from the houses of the great.
Ah! To be all alone in a little cell, to be alone, all alone:
Alone I came into the world
alone I shall go from it.

Excursions

Let's leave vocal music for a moment and take a look at his solo piano music. Barber's first published work for solo piano was *Excursions*. He writes a note to the performer, explaining the work:

These are 'Excursions' in small classical forms into regional American idioms. Their rhythmic characteristics, as well as their source in folk material and their scoring, reminiscent of local instruments are easily recognized.

The work consists of four movements and explores the sounds of various regions of the country: the bustling city, the blues bar, the cowboy's west, and an old-fashioned barn dance.

Movement I is marked "un poco allegro" (a little lively) and is in a classical rondo 5-part form (ABACA). The A section which starts the piece has a busy *ostinato* bass. (Ostinato is from the word "stubborn," and you can see why...the left hand is relentless in its eighth-note pattern.) This bass line sounds like a very busy big city (New York, perhaps?) constantly on the move. That *ostinato* bass is often described as a boogie-woogie bass. The piece is modern and jazzy, with all sorts of blues harmonies. The right hand has many tricky passages, making it a challenging piece to play.

Movement II is marked "in slow blues tempo," and is composed over a 12-bar blues chord progression that all jazz musicians know and use. The 12-bar (12-measure) blues is basically the following progression: (one chord per measure..which usually has four beats per measure.)

I I I I IV IV I I V IV I I

If you are playing in the key of G, (which IS the key of this movement) this translates to the following chords:

G G G G C C G G D C G G

When you follow the score as you listen to the music, you can find these notes in the bottom of the left hand in each measure.

Movement III is marked “Allegretto” (which means a little slower than “Allegro”) and it is the most difficult of all. Its form is a Theme and Variations, and the theme is *The Streets of Laredo*, a cowboy song. (If you aren’t familiar with this folk song, you can find several versions on YouTube.) How does this composer from Philadelphia know a cowboy song? Perhaps because he was stationed in Fort Worth during World War II and probably got first-hand knowledge of the west and its folk songs. He was drafted in 1942 when the US joined the war, and since he was already a well-known composer, he was given a lot of **leeway**, and was able to continue writing music, despite being in the Army Air Corps. (At that time in our history, many celebrities were drafted in the hopes of lifting the **morale** of the American people.)

This third movement is by far the most difficult to play. The hands are “at war” a lot of the time, although the listener isn’t aware of the pianist’s struggles. One hand often has to play seven notes in a measure while the other plays eight. When this happens, the hands only “meet” on beat one, and throughout the rest of the measure they are quickly alternating. However, instead of sounding like the hands are at **crossed purposes**, the effect is a light, breezy, casual result that doesn’t sound all that complicated to the average listener.

Movement IV is marked “Allegro molto” (very fast) and is romping good fun. You can hear fiddles, banjos, harmonicas, and it is clearly a barn dance. The repeated notes sound like a banjo, and the quick tempo is toe-tapping stuff!

In his *Excursions* Barber explores the abundant styles of music rooted in the cultures and history of the United States. Composing in styles of boogie-woogie, blues, cowboy ballad, and barnyard dance, Barber conveys the many different nuances of American folk music, according to his neo-Romantic ideas. Although these movements are not some of his most influential works, they are still pieces worthy of study and of continued performance, and they are a delight (and challenge) to play!



Here is a photo of Corporal Barber and conductor Serge Koussevitzky (coo-suh-VIT-skee)

Here is the link which includes the musical score. Try to follow along, and let your imagination run free as you “tour” the United States.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkaXAA8P4_8 (14:13)

This You Tube performance is a little disappointing, but it is the only video I could find that includes the score, and I wanted you to see the notes fly by. Now take a listen to Vladimir Horowitz playing Movement IV at Carnegie Hall in 1945. Although he takes a few liberties with the score...adds a measure here, drops a measure there...his playing is **unsurpassed**. (FYI: Horowitz is one of our greatest pianists to ever live.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AX7_VuKCB34 (2:30)

(It is the first piece on this link.)



A photo of Horowitz and Barber in later years

Souvenirs

Barber originally composed *Souvenirs* in 1952 for a ballet by the **renowned** dancer and choreographer Todd Bolender. He then arranged the score for piano, four hands, and also adapted it as an orchestral suite; a version for solo piano came, as well, in 1954. The music captures Barber’s fondness for New York, evoking that city’s yesteryear love of life. “Imagine a **divertissement** in a setting of the Palm Court of the Hotel Plaza in New York, the year about 1914, epoch of the first tangos,” Barber wrote. “Souvenirs—remembered with affection, not in irony or with tongue in cheek, but in amused tenderness.” The work is a suite of six miniatures, each based on a traditional dance form. The opening **Waltz** begins with a stylish introduction before settling into a graceful melody. The following **Schottische** combines prettiness and **piquancy**. The **Pas de deux** is a darker hue and conjures an air of seductive mystery. A gleeful Two-Step follows. Barber labels the suite’s **penultimate** movement **Hesitation-Tango**, which clearly **evokes** the influence of that Argentine dance. The work concludes with a rollicking **Galop**, showing occasional influences of Stravinsky and Poulenc, who were modern composers from Russia and France and were Barber’s contemporaries.

Just a note: A piano duet has two parts: Primo (PREE-moh) and Secondo (se- KAHN-doh) meaning first part and second part. The first part usually contains the melody and often has both hands in treble clef, while the secondo part usually contains the accompaniment and often has both hands in the bass clef. A good duet, like Barber's, lets the two players take turns with melody and accompaniment and in some places, the hands even cross each other.

(Further side note: Piano duets began to appear in the second half of the 1800s when the piano rose in popularity. In those days, it was only proper if unmarried men and women had a **chaperone** when they spent time together, but their sitting side by side on a duet bench was perfectly acceptable. By crossing hands, the players were required to sit even closer together! Chaperone, beware!)

Here is a link to the last dance, *Galop*. Notice how closely the "inside hands" are to each other. (Secondo's right and Primo's left) They actually cross in the B section, but the camera angle isn't great at that moment to be able to see it clearly. Look closely, and you might be able to tell where this happens.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNSrYIMUEJ8>

Here is the ballet version of the *Pas de deux* and the *Galop*...start at 6:22 and watch to the end. I'm sorry the stage lighting is so dark, but the performance is still very nice.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LH57Bw4GRcg>

Knoxville: Summer of 1915

In 1938 James Agee wrote his **rapturous** prose-poem, *Knoxville: Summer, 1915*, at the age of 28. Agee said later that he had written its five pages in a breathless 90 minutes, as a way to experiment with free-form writing. That summer was Agee's last with an "**intact**" family, because as already stated earlier, James lost his father when he was only seven years old.

He described the lost world of porches and the closely knit communities that shared them. The shady, street-front **verandas** that were once an **amenity** on every American house were killed off by air-conditioning. By the 1950s, builders stopped putting porches on new houses, and families retreated indoors to their newly-invented televisions. These changes would appear to make Agee's writing very dated today – the verandas are gone. Yet what endures is perhaps more important: the nagging sense of lost community that they represented. Agee put into words his vision of small-town America that we often scoff at as a **cliché**...yet we continue to return to it. That it can still move us is proof that, while porches may go out of style, the deeper things that bind us endure.

Knoxville is set in one movement. Like Agee, Barber's chose to compose in a relatively free large-scale form in developing his work; both works represent the fruits of a **spontaneous** improvisation. When Barber and Agee met, they realized that they had some things in common. Agee was touched by the death of his father in his childhood, while Barber was, during the time

of composing this work, enduring his own father's deteriorating health. The two men were of similar ages. Most importantly, however, the two men were so compelled by **nostalgia** and inspiration that they wrote their pieces quickly and without much revision. For Barber this was remarkable since he would sometimes spend a whole year on one composition.

Barber paints an **idyllic** picture of Agee's native Knoxville, Tennessee with his music. The preamble is a simple, dreamlike depiction of an evening in the American South, narrated by a child who seems, at times, to transform into an adult. The opening music presents a “rocking” motive in the orchestra underneath the melody that sets a beautiful mood.

(Note from Dr. Holly: This piece touches my heart especially, because, even though I didn't grow up in Knoxville, and 1915 was definitely not my generation, but that of my grandparents, we spent many evenings on quilts on the grass as children, and there were many summer family gatherings centered around an old hand-cranked ice cream freezer in the backyard of my beloved grandparents' home – grandparents who loved to sit on their front porch, by the way, and wave neighbors passing by. It is difficult for me to listen to this piece with a dry eye, since most of that family has passed on now. I am thankful to God for such happy childhood memories.)

Composer Aaron Copland remarked once that he regretted the fact that Barber had discovered and set Agee's text before he did...he wished he had been able to set the words to music himself. He said, “But then we wouldn't have Barber's beautiful music...”

Here is the link to Renée Fleming and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. Please follow the lyrics as you listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0PaUMOjziI> (15:30)

LYRICS:

It has become that time of evening
When people sit on their porches,
Rocking gently and talking gently
And watching the street
And the standing up into their sphere
Of possession of the trees,
Of birds' hung havens, hangars.
People go by; things go by.
A horse, drawing a buggy,
Breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt;
A loud auto: a quiet auto;
People in pairs, not in a hurry,
Scuffling, switching their weight of **estival** body,
Talking casually,
The taste hovering over them of vanilla,
Strawberry, pasteboard, and starched milk,

The image upon them of lovers and horsemen,
Squared with clowns in hueless amber.

A streetcar raising its iron moan;
Stopping;
Belling and starting, stertorous;
Rousing and raising again
Its iron increasing moan
And swimming its gold windows and straw seats
On past and past and past,
The bleak spark crackling and cursing above it
Like a small malignant spirit
Set to dog its tracks;
The iron whine rises on rising speed;
Still risen, faints; halts;
The faint stinging bell;
Rises again, still fainter;
Fainting, lifting lifts,
Faints foregone;
Forgotten.
Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew.
My father has drained,
He has coiled the hose
Low on the length of lawns,
A frailing of fire who breathes...
Parents on porches:
Rock and rock.
From damp strings morning glories hang their ancient faces.
The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air
At once enchants my eardrums.

On the rough wet grass
Of the backyard
My father and mother have spread quilts
We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt,
And I too am lying there.
They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet,
Of nothing in particular,
Of nothing at all.
The stars are wide and alive,
They seem each like a smile
Of great sweetness,

And they seem very near.
All my people are larger bodies than mine,
With voices gentle and meaningless
Like the voices of sleeping birds.
One is an artist, he is living at home.
One is a musician, she is living at home.
One is my mother who is good to me.
One is my father who is good to me.

By some chance, here they are,
All on this earth;
And who shall ever tell the sorrow
Of being on this earth, lying, on quilts,
On the grass,
In a summer evening,
Among the sounds of the night.

May God bless my people,
My uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father,
Oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble;
And in the hour of their taking away.

After a little
I am taken in
And put to bed.
Sleep, soft smiling,
Draws me unto her:
And those receive me,
Who quietly treat me,
As one familiar and well-beloved in that home:
But will not, oh, will not,
Not now, not ever;
But will not ever tell me who I am.

Adagio for Strings

Adagio for Strings was originally a movement of Barber's first string quartet, but he **rescored** it for string orchestra on the request of conductor Arturo Toscanini. The version we know today was premiered in 1938 by Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra.

In 1967 Barber published a choral version of the *Adagio*. This version is almost identical to the original, but with added text from the "Agnus Dei," or "Lamb of God," of the Catholic Mass. In the choral version, the piece ends with the words "dona nobis pacem" or "grant us peace."

While Barber's *Adagio* is one of the most popular pieces of classical music ever written, most audiences don't know that this profound work was written when the composer was only 26 years old! The arrangement we know today was premiered two years later, when Barber was 28.



Here is a photo of Barber as a young man.

This piece has been used in over a dozen movies...perhaps the most effective one being the heart-rending ending of *The Elephant Man*. It has been used at least a dozen times on a variety of television shows, including *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*.

According to Spotify, Barber's five most popular pieces are

1. Adagio
 2. Adagio
 3. Adagio
 4. Agnus Dei
- and
5. Adagio.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVNhFMZP4NM> (10:00)

