

Samuel Barber, *Adagio for strings*



"I have written 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. 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 try 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)."

From a letter Barber wrote to his mother at the age of 9

Samuel Osborne Barber II (March 9, 1910 – January 23, 1981) is an American composer of orchestral, opera, choral, and piano music. His *Adagio for Strings* is among his most popular compositions and widely considered a masterpiece of modern classical music. The composition is scored for strings and is approximately 8 minutes long.

Barber was born into a comfortable, educated, social, and distinguished Irish-American family. His father was a doctor, and his mother was a pianist. His aunt, Louise Homer, was a leading contralto at the Metropolitan Opera and his uncle, Sidney Homer, was a composer of American art songs. Barber became profoundly interested in music at a very young age and wrote his first musical at the age of 7, followed by an attempt to write his first opera at the age of 10. He was an organist at the age of 12. When he was only 14, he entered the Curtis Institute, where he studied piano, composition, and voice.

From his early to late twenties, Barber wrote a many successful compositions, launching him into the spotlight of the classical music community. Many of his compositions were commissioned or first performed by such famous artists as Vladimir Horowitz, Eleanor Steber, Raya Garbousova, John Browning, Leontyne Price, Pierre Bernac, Francis Poulenc, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

Barber won the Pulitzer Prize twice: in 1958 for his first opera *Vanessa*, and in 1963 for his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. He was also president of the International Music Council of UNESCO, and member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Barber's compositional style has been lauded for its musical logic, sense of architectural design, effortless melodic gift. His *Adagio for Strings* originated as the second movement in his String Quartet No. 1, Op. 11, composed in 1936. In the original it follows a violently contrasting first movement, and is succeeded by a brief reprise of this music.

In January 1938 Barber sent the piece to Arturo Toscanini. The world famous conductor returned the score without comment. Barber was annoyed and avoided the conductor until Toscanini sent a word through a friend that he was planning to perform the piece and had returned it simply because he had already memorized it. The work was given its first performance, along with Barber's first Essay for Orchestra, in a radio broadcast with Arturo Toscanini conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra on November 5, 1938 in New York. The recording of the 1938 world premiere was selected in 2005 for permanent preservation in the National Recording Registry at the United States Library of Congress.

The piece is in an arch form, employing and then inverting, expanding, and varying a stepwise ascending melody. It is in the key of B-flat minor and in 4/2 time. The long, flowing melodic line moves freely between the voices in the string choir; for example, the first section of the Adagio begins with the principal melodic cell played by first violins, but ends with its restatement by violas, transposed down a fifth. Violas continue with a variation on the melodic cell in the second section; the basses are silent for this and the next section. The expansive middle section begins with cellos playing the principal melodic cell in mezzo-soprano range; as the section builds, the string choir moves up the scale to their highest registers, culminating in a fortissimo-forte climax followed by sudden silence. A brief series of mournful chords serve as a coda to this portion of the piece, and reintroduces the bass section. The last section is a restatement of the original theme, with an inversion of the second piece of the melodic cell, played by first violins and violas in unison; the piece ends with first violins slowly restating the first five notes of the melody in alto register, holding the last note over a brief silence and a fading accompaniment.

The piece was played at the funeral of Prince Rainier of Monaco and at the funeral of Albert Einstein. Contrary to popular belief, it was not played at the funeral of Franklin D. Roosevelt, but was broadcast over the radio at the announcement of his death. It was also performed in 2001 at a ceremony at the Royal Albert Hall to commemorate the victims of the September 11 attacks.

In 2004, listeners of the BBC's *Today* program voted Adagio the "saddest classical" work ever, ahead of "Dido's Lament" from *Dido and Æneas* by Henry Purcell, the *Adagietto* from Gustav Mahler's 5th symphony, *Metamorphosen* by Richard Strauss and *Gloomy Sunday* as sung by Billie Holiday. Adagio for Strings may also be heard on many film and TV soundtracks, including Oliver Stone's Oscar-winning film *Platoon*, David Lynch's 1980 Oscar-nominated film *The Elephant Man*, Michael Moore's documentary *Sicko*, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's Oscar-nominated 2001 film *Amélie*.