



## Biographical outline

### 1. Childhood

Samuel Barber was born March 9th, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania, in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He grew up in a middle-class family with his father, a doctor and respected member of the Episcopalian community, his mother, an amateur piano player of Irish descent, and his sister Sara, three years younger. Very early in life, Samuel took piano lessons from his mother and his first teacher, William Hatton Green. Before long, his musical talent transpired. At six, he writes his first miniatures for piano and songs. His family and friends cultivate the young boy's blooming talent. His aunt Louise Homer, a prominent contralto of the New York Metropolitan Opera, together with his uncle Sidney Homer, a famous composer of art songs, become his musical mentors. At nine, Samuel writes a letter to his mother, ending with the proclamation: 'I was meant to be a composer, and will be I'm sure.' Driven by his ambition, he begins to write an opera, *The Rose Tree*, based on a libretto written by... the family cook. He only composes the first act, but the boy's determination removes any doubt from his parents' mind about their son's musical talent. Mentored by Sidney Homer, Samuel studies music and plays the organ at a local church. Three years later, following an audition, the director of the Baltimore Musical College insists the Barbers send their son to study at the newly established Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

### 2. The Training Years

His intellectual and artistic training at the Curtis Institute will last ten years under the watchful eye of its founder, Mary Louise Curtis Bok. Barber's teachers are as renowned as the composer Rosario Scalero, the singer Emilio de Gogorza, the pianist Isabelle Vengerova and the conductor Fritz Reiner. His talent develops quickly and lives up to expectations. Barber has his first success with the *Overture "The School for Scandal"*, which wins him his first prize, while another prize for his *Violin Sonata* (the work has been lost since) allows him to pay for his first trip to Europe. *Dover Beach*, for baritone voice and string quartet, the *Cello Sonata* and the *Music for a Scene from Shelley* make him one of the most talented students in his class. While at the Institute, Samuel meets Gian Carlo Menotti, a young Italian who speaks in halting English and becomes his friend and alter ego. In the summer,

they travel together to France, Switzerland, Austria and Germany. They visit Menotti's family in Italy and spend a few weeks studying at Scalero's house in the Aosta Valley. They also visit Arturo Toscanini who is on vacation near Lake Maggiore. After several meetings, Toscanini informs Barber that he would like to perform one of his works, one day. By the spring of 1935, Barber believes he still has not written a piece worth the trust the maestro has shown him. However, on three occasions his music is rewarded publicly : a radio show is dedicated to his compositions, his symphonic poem after Shelley is a tremendous success at Carnegie Hall, and the prestigious classical music publishing company G. Schirmer Inc. (New York) offers him his first contract. Before long, Barber is awarded a Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship and the American Prix de Rome, that gives him the opportunity to move to Italy and spend two years at the American Academy of Rome.

### 3. From Rome to Paris

While the stay in Rome does not prove personally exhilarating as Barber finds the atmosphere at the Academy particularly elitist and stifling, he composes some of his major works there. Among them, the *First Symphony* (in one movement), several songs including *Sure on this Shining Night*, the first *Essay for Orchestra* and, most noticeably, the *String Quartet*. The last was completed during a heavenly stay with Menotti in the countryside near Salzburg, Austria. Fully aware of the quality of its slow movement, Barber transcribes it for a string orchestra and sends it to Toscanini, along with the score of the *Essay*. Some time later, Toscanini returns the two works with no comment or explanation. Barber is bitterly disappointed. In reality, the maestro has memorized the two scores with the intent to perform the works with his NBC Symphony Orchestra at the end of 1938. The première of the *Adagio* and the *Essay* wins rapturous acclaim. The *Adagio* is particularly well received and immediately becomes part of musical history - partly because of the debate it stirs in *The New York Times* between the partisans of the musical avant-garde and those of 'modern melodic music'. The debate is of little influence as the success of the *Adagio for Strings* continues until today. Barber will later come to feel that his other compositions were too often overshadowed by the *Adagio*.

Towards the end of the 30's, then in charge of the Madrigal Chorus at the Curtis Institute, the composer focuses primarily on compositions for the choir. For the first time in Barber's career, his music appears to be linked to the outside reality of the times, with works such as *A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map*. Undoubtedly inspired by world tensions, Barber chooses a poem by the English writer Stephen Spender depicting the death of a soldier during the Spanish Civil War. History soon

impinges upon Barber's creative surroundings : while on vacation in Europe, working on the *Violin Concerto* commissioned by an industrial tycoon from Philadelphia, Barber is forced to leave France as the Nazi Germany threatens to enter the country. He completes the concerto onboard a transatlantic ship returning home to the United States. Energizing and vibrant, the *Violin Concerto's* finale soon becomes, and continues to be, the favorite of many violinists all over the world. An interesting note, the violinist for whom the concerto was commissioned eventually turned it down, deeming the last movement too different from the rest of the work.

#### 4. *In Tempore Belli*

Back in America, Barber moves in with Menotti and accepts a chair of Professor of Orchestration at the Curtis Institute of Music. In addition, he becomes the youngest member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. But his now established position within the American artistic world does not relieve him of his duties as a citizen. Soon after the completion of his *2nd Essay for Orchestra*, premiered by Bruno Walter, Barber is drafted. Due to his bad eyesight and with the assistance of conductor Serge Koussevitzky, Barber manages to secure a clerical position in the United States Army. He begins composing music to keep up the morale of American troops. Corporal Barber writes the *Commando March* and *Symphony No. 2* as a tribute to the US Army Air Corps. Being sent in one of the USAAC bases, Barber flies along on several missions in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the pilots' experiences. Twenty years later, Barber would destroy the original score of the symphony, and re-use the second movement as a symphonic poem that he'll quite appropriately rename *Night Flight* (a reference, this time, to Saint-Exupéry's famous novel and not to a war experience.)

In the midst of those troubled times, Barber and Menotti - with the financial support from Mary Louis Curtis Bok - purchase a house in Mount Kisco, in the leafy suburbs of New York City. This is a time of happiness for Barber. The house in the woods is named Capricorn and Barber, Menotti and the poet Robert Horan move in together, far from the urban hubbub. Life in the country home becomes an inspiration to the composer. There, he writes the *Capricorn Concerto*, a work reminiscent of a baroque concerto grosso, where three solo instruments seem to portray the three friends. Together with the *Excursions* for piano, completed at the end of 1942, the *Capricorn Concerto* is one of the few 'light-hearted' works Barber writes during those years.

## 5. Commissions

After the war, Barber experiences an intensely creative period on two fronts. While he meets many of the musicians and singers who are to become his 'champions', he is also greatly stimulated by commissions for genres he has not yet fully explored, such as ballet, instrumental music, vocal music with orchestra and opera. Thanks to the network of important figures of the American musical world he's developed during the previous decade, the post-war period proves extremely fruitful for the composer. Through a private sponsor, conductor Serge Koussevitzky commissions Barber to write a concerto for his protégée, the Russian cellist Raya Garbousova. In 1942, the composer had previously committed to write a cantata for solo singer, choir and orchestra for Koussevitzky (he will eventually complete the *Prayers of Kierkegaard* in 1954). Barber immediately starts working on the *Cello Concerto*. Surprisingly, the collaboration with Garbousova generates some tension between the two, but Barber considers the concerto a masterpiece. In 1954, he even chooses to conduct it - something he very rarely did - with cellist Zara Nelsova for a Decca/London recording.

Another significant commission takes the shape of a ballet for the Martha Graham Dance Company, one of the most avant-garde American dance company of the time. Graham has already commissioned works by Aaron Copland and Carlos Chavez and she turns to Barber with a story based on the theme of *Medea*. *Serpent Heart*, written for chamber orchestra and later turned into a symphonic suite known as *Cave of the Heart*, receives much public and critic acclaim. (The choreography, however, is not greeted with the same enthusiasm.)

In 1946, the Barber family is struck by two distressing events. Both Louise Homer and Barber's father become seriously ill. A powerless witness to the physical degradation of his relatives, Barber composes a deeply nostalgic work after the short prose poem *Knoxville, Summer of 1915* by the American writer and journalist James Agee. It depicts a quiet evening in a Southern family, seen through the eyes of a child. Starting in a pastoral atmosphere, the descriptive music slowly turns into the unnerving confidence of a child questioning his place in the universe. The composer has never put so much of himself in his art before. The work is completed in April, 1947 and Barber's aunt passes away in May, followed three months later by his father. The first performance of *Knoxville, Summer 1915* is sung by soprano Eleanor Steber at the dawn of her career.

In the fall of 1947, after a summer of mourning, Barber begins work on a piano sonata which he completes in the spring of 1949 after a tormented gestation period. Enthused by his new acquaintance, Vladimir Horowitz, (who has already performed three of Barber's four *Excursions* during the war) and boosted by a commission for the 25th anniversary of the League of Composers, Barber throws

himself into the challenging piece. The work consists in four movements based on four distinct topics conveying Chopin, Rachmaninov, Liszt and Prokofiev. Each movement is of a different harmony including an attempt at dodecaphonic music, a complete novelty for Barber. The last movement, a furiously virtuoso fugue, takes time to compose. But the resulting score, heavy with an intense sense of drama, proves extremely efficient. The *Sonata* has since been regarded by pianists and the public alike as a masterwork in the repertoire.

In comparison to the painful birth of this monumental composition, Barber's next three works sound more peaceful, almost like intervals. However, each of them exudes some form of darkness, expressed through the notion of time passing in the song-cycle *Mémoires Passagères* (dedicated to the French duo Francis Poulenc-Pierre Bernac), in the omnipresent quest for solitude of the *Hermit Songs* (based on anonymous lyrics by 8<sup>th</sup>-13th centuries Irish monks and sung by Leontyne Price), as well as in the autumnal atmosphere of the wind quintet, paradoxically called *Summer Music*. With *Prayers of Kierkegaard*, a mystical cantata for solo singer, mixed choir and orchestra, Barber embraces once again an ambitious form. However, in the mid 50's, a new challenge awaits him.

## 6. An American Masterwork

That challenge comes from "The Met." In 1952, Barber has refused an offer to write an operatic work from Rudolf Bing, the director of the New York Metropolitan Opera. Eventually, Barber agrees to compose his first opera if Menotti writes the libretto. Barber's companion had been awarded two Pulitzer Prizes for his operas, *The Consul* in 1950 then *The Saint of Bleeker Street* in 1955. His talent as a drama writer is, therefore, already widely recognized.

Unexpectedly, the pair find their inspiration in the *Seven Gothic Tales* by the Danish writer Isak Dinesen (*aka* Karen Blixen). The background atmosphere of the bitter-sweet opera *Vanessa* is set "in a Northern country, around 1905". The story revolves around a middle-aged woman and her young niece, Erika. The woman is obsessed by her memory of a lost love and the young girl falls in love with a handsome man who takes refuge in their chalet in the middle of a snowstorm. Barber and Menotti put in place a cruel game of confused feelings versus the power of reason, set somewhere in between dreamland and reality. All in all, the plot is somewhat reminiscent of Schnitzler's *La Ronde* or Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

Barber initially writes the role of Vanessa for Maria Callas, who comes to Capricorn during the summer of 1956 to read the libretto and listen to the music. Surprisingly, after the audition, the diva turns down the offered role. She legitimately feels that the real heroine of the drama is Erika, not Vanessa. The Yugoslav soprano Sena Jurinac is then chosen for the leading role but two months

before the première, she unexpectedly cancels her engagement. Barber turns to the promising Eleanor Steber. The choice will prove a much inspired one : after her triumphant performance on June 15th, 1958, the young singer's name will forever remain associated with the character of Vanessa. The cover story of *Newsweek* magazine reads 'An American masterpiece'; 'At last, an American grand opera!' exclaims Dmitri Mitropoulos, the conductor of the first performance. At the Salzburg Festival a few months later, critics seem a little less enthusiastic, and as the 60's passes by, the opera appears to be less frequently produced. However, the music of *Vanessa*, with its splendid quintet in the 4th act, remains a masterpiece reference in the history of the 20th century opera. Many of its arias and the delicious choral setting of "Under the Willow Tree" are still regularly performed in concert.

## 7. Towards a New Opera

In 1958, the Pulitzer Prize for Music is awarded to *Vanessa*, making Barber one of the most famous and sought-after American composers. Prestigious commissions are expected. Soon a venue stands out for his next composition : the new Lincoln Center for Performing Arts is to open between 1962 and 1966. Located in the heart of Manhattan, the architectural complex is to house the new Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, the Juilliard School of Music, the New York City Opera and the New York State Theater. Barber's *Piano Concerto* and *Andromache's Farewell* are included in the inaugural season of the Philharmonic Hall.

If the delivery of the *Piano Sonata* has proven a painful process, writing the *Piano Concerto* parallels yet another personal grieving period for Barber. In July 1961, his sister dies. Over the ensuing period of creative block, Barber has a chalet built in the Italian Dolomites that will later become his refuge and lair on the Old Continent. Meanwhile, the concerto is still in search of its last movement. On his return from a trip to Russia, where the Congress of Soviet Composers has welcomed him as a guest of honor, Barber finally begins composing again, encouraged by Vladimir Horowitz and John Browning (to whom the concerto will eventually be dedicated). When the final *Allegro Molto* is completed, Browning, who is to perform the work, has only two months and a limited number of rehearsals to memorize the score and polish his playing. Despite the rush of the last weeks, both the soloist and the conductor, Erich Leinsdorf, receive a standing ovation for their performance. Some months later, Barber is awarded his second Pulitzer Prize, crowning the achievement of the *Piano Concerto*.

The atmosphere surrounding the writing of *Andromache's Farewell*, a concert aria written for the young American singer Martina Arroyo, is altogether different. The complicity and serenity of the relationship between Barber and Arroyo act as an

enchantment. Again, the première of the work ends in extended praise from the public and critics alike. This wave of success encourages Barber to accept the commission for a second opera, planned for the opening of the new Met in the fall of 1966. As for *Vanessa*, the composer takes a while to settle on a subject, partly because Menotti has been excluded from the project. In the end, the Shakespearian tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* is chosen, and the Italian director Franco Zeffirelli is appointed to write the libretto and stage the opera. Immediately, Barber finds himself under a large amount of political and media pressure as everyone in America is expecting the evening of September 16th to be a historical date, forever remembered by the entire nation as the night when the Metropolitan Opera became the greatest opera theater in the world.

Barber and his stage director-librettist however seem to disagree on a number of points, and generally do not share the same vision of the opera. On top of the ominously difficult collaboration, a threat of a musician's union strike does not bode well for the entire production. Despite the fantastic vocal performances of both Leontyne Price and Justino Diaz, the première of *Antony and Cleopatra* is a complete fiasco. Barber's music does not live up to the grand atmosphere of the story, Zeffirelli's costumes and sets, with their hundreds of extras and live animals on stage, make the show a grand and somewhat kitsch Hollywood costume drama. Its overabundance of performers and gaudy scenery literally breaks the new staging machinery. Five hours after the curtain was raised on *Antony and Cleopatra*, the ovations of the 4 000 people in the audience do not fool anyone. The next morning, when Barber embarks for Italy without even reviewing the papers, he's seen more to be fleeing than traveling.

## 8. The Fall

A litany of disappointments and grievances punctuates the last fourteen years of Barber's life. A few months after the failure of *Antony and Cleopatra*, his mother passes away and, affected by the uncertainty surrounding his relationship with Menotti, Barber becomes depressed. The last straw occurs when Menotti, who has just bought a huge mansion in Scotland, demands that Capricorn be sold. Barber is forced to sell the property that was associated with his creative life for nearly thirty years. He returns to New York almost an exile.

Early in 1975, the Juilliard School of Music stages a new production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, in an abridged and revised version Barber has written with the assistance of Menotti. It's the last time the two men will work together. The experience momentarily reconciles Barber with life, but it only lasts a moment : a certain bitterness develops in him towards the new generation of people who have stopped appreciating his music. Praised yesterday, his works now seem

disregarded, in a time when American music - and all music for that matter - has necessarily to be “resolutely modern”. Barber always spoke openly of his scorn for the icons of so-called “modern music”, from Charles Ives to Elliott Carter. In the 60’s and 70’s, the neo-romanticism that characterizes Barber’s music is looked upon with suspicion, even contempt. Feeling ostracized, Barber gradually withdraws from the musical milieu.

With the support of new sponsors and faithful friends such as Leontyne Price and the conductor Eugene Ormandy, Barber achieves to write a few more works, but the public and the critics seem to take only a mild and polite interest in their performances. Still, the beauty of his music during this time is undeniably striking in many compositions : the melancholic Schumann-style *Ballad* for piano which, measure after measure, fades into a deeply moving silence ; the sibylline and mysterious song-cycle *Despite and Still* ; the *Third Essay for Orchestra* with its enigmatic percussions ; the heart-breaking *Three Songs op.45*, offered to Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as a last gesture towards the Old Europe ; *Fadograph of a Yestern Scene*, with the sepia shades of its orchestra ; and the unfinished *Canzonetta*, short movement of a concerto Barber wanted to compose for the oboe, this almost perfect replica of the human voice.

At a time when inspiration seems to be gradually escaping Barber, he unexpectedly composes the cantata *The Lovers*, a rather ambitious work after Pablo Neruda’s poems. Written for baritone, mixed choir and orchestra, the composition is dedicated to Valentin Herranz, Barber’s young assistant who will remain by his side until the end. In those pages, Barber appears both sensual and stoic, as if the passionate poems of the Chilean had filled him with a new strength and wisdom. The experience provides only a momentary respite : on January 23rd, 1981, Samuel Barber dies of lymphatic cancer in his New York apartment. In front of his bed, the poster of the European premiere of *Antony and Cleopatra*, staged in Paris a few days earlier...