

## THE INSTRUMENTAL CONCERTI OF SAMUEL BARBER: THE COMPOSER-PERFORMER RELATIONSHIP

Ovidiu MARINESCU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Samuel Barber's instrumental music is idiomatic in its writing, shows mastery of the form, and displays a fine balance between virtuosity and lyricism. The concerti for violin, cello, and piano were composed with specific performers in mind, and they show a clear influence exerted by those performers. Barber closely worked with the artists while composing the concerti, especially the cello and the piano ones, and made changes in all of them to suit specific requests.*

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The year 2010 marks Samuel Barber's birth centennial. Composing in an age when musical experiment was the fashion and modernism was the main artistic direction, Barber's music is defined by a respect for the nineteenth century tradition, expressed in form, in tonal background, and lyricism.

Several influences can be noted: the excellent training he got at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, under the supervision of composer Rosario Scalero, the inspiration and guidance he received from his uncle Sidney Homer – a composer of art song – and his aunt Louise Homer – the leading contralto at the Metropolitan Opera, and the close personal relationship with composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who opened a door to the great

European traditions, and especially the Italian culture.

While Barber composed many works for the voice, including three operas, chamber music for voice accompanied by instruments, and over 100 songs, some of them still unpublished, he also composed a good number of instrumental works for the one instrument, chamber ensembles, or orchestra, including three concerti for instruments and orchestra (one each for violin, cello, and piano), the *Toccata Festiva* for organ and orchestra, and a *Canzonetta* for oboe and orchestra. The three concerti were composed with specific performers in mind, and the technical and artistic profile of each performer influenced the music.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, West Chester University of Pennsylvania, USA.

### **Concerto for Violin and Orchestra op. 14 (1939)**

The concerto was commissioned by Samuel Fels, an industrialist and board member of the Curtis Institute of Music for his adopted son, prodigy Iso Briselli. Briselli studied the Curtis Institute with Carl Flesch and was an accomplished violinist, having made his New York and Philadelphia debuts performing the Violin Concerto no. 2 by Paganini and Beethoven's Violin Concerto. At Curtis, Briselli befriended another young violinist, Gama Gilbert, who later became a music critic. When Curtis Institute opened in 1924, Barber was the second student enrolled and he studied there until his graduation in 1934. Independently, Barber, Briselli and Gilbert moved to New York and eventually reconnected, often going to concerts together, along with Gian Carlo Menotti. In the spring of 1939, Gilbert persuaded Fels to commission Barber to write a concerto for Briselli for the sum of \$1000, payable in two installments: a down payment of \$500 with the balance due when the concerto was finished.

Barber spent that summer in Switzerland and by August sent Briselli the first two movements. According to Broder,<sup>[1]</sup> Briselli declared the music "too simple and not brilliant enough for a concerto." After the summer in Switzerland, Barber went to Paris, where he planned to finish the concerto with a third movement which would "display the artist's technical powers"<sup>[2]</sup>. Unfortunately plans were interrupted when he and Menotti had to evacuate France due to the beginning of the war in Europe. Their trip across the ocean on board of the *Champlain* allowed Barber to work on the finale, with further work done after their arrival, in the Pocono Mountains. Barber sent the third movement to Briselli, who declared it too

difficult and refused to play it. Mr. Fels demanded his money back, which Barber had already spent in Europe. A music trial was organized at the Curtis Institute to settle the dispute. According to Heyman<sup>[3]</sup>, one afternoon, violin student Herbert Baumel was approached by pianist Ralph Berkowitz to participate in the proceedings and was handed a hand-written incomplete violin part with no composer name, to be prepared within two hours. He was instructed to play the selection very fast. Two hours later, Baumel returned dressed-up to find a distinguished committee that included Curtis Institute founder Mary Curtis Bok, and proceeded to play the selection brilliantly accompanied by Berkowitz, much to the delight of the small audience, who cheered and praised both the performers and the composer. The work was deemed playable and Mr. Fels was instructed to pay the balance due on the commission. Briselli had to relinquish the right to the first performance.

The third movement of the concerto at the root of the dispute is a fast moto-perpetuo, where the soloist plays continuously for the whole movement. The tempo indicated is  $\frac{1}{4}$  note = 192. Enough concerns had been raised, so Barber arranged for several trial rehearsals with Baumel and the Curtis Orchestra directed by Fritz Reiner. Furthermore, Barber asked Oscar Shumsky to take a look at the concerto, and a reading was arranged in New York at the home of Gama Gilbert. Barber played the piano part with Shumsky sight-reading it from the piano reduction looking over Barber's shoulders<sup>[4]</sup>. Things went well and Barber went along with the preparations for the premiere, including his search for the perfect violinist to present the work. In August of 1940 Barber had a meeting with violinist Albert Spalding to show him the concerto, and the violinist immediately consented to do the premiere and take the

work on tour. The first performances were given by Spalding and the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Academy of Music on February 7 and 8, 1941, followed by concerts in New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. Further performances followed with Ruth Posselt and the Boston Symphony, and Charles Turner and Barber himself conducting in Frankfurt and Berlin. Prior to the performances in Germany, Barber requested a masterclass with George Enesco at his house in Paris, sometimes early 1951. Barber accompanied Turner on the piano and Enesco lauded the work and gave a few tips to Turner. Among the violin students invited to audit the class was a gray-haired old lady who turned pages for Barber. It turned out the old lady was Queen Elizabeth of Belgium who took occasional violin lessons from Enesco.

#### **Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra, op. 22 (1945)**

The Cello Concerto was commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky, conductor of the Boston Symphony, and a great supporter of new music. Koussevitzky admired cellist Raya Garbousova, and he often invited her to be a soloist with the Boston Symphony. Funding for the commission was provided by an amateur cellist and music lover, John Nicolas Brown, who was also a devotee of Garbousova. Brown had purchased for Garbousova a well-known Stradivarius cello made in 1689. Koussevitzky initially planned to commission for Bohuslav Martinu, but changed his mind and approached Barber.

Barber was no stranger to writing for the cello, as one of his first works was the Cello Sonata, op. 6, composed in 1932 while a student at the Curtis Institute of Music. One of his closest friends was cellist Orlando Cole, who was also a Curtis student. While writing the sonata, Barber

frequently met with Cole, and explored the technical possibilities and the lyrical attributes of the instrument.

Before beginning the cello concerto, during the winter of 1944-45, Barber met with Garbousova and had her play through her repertoire to become familiar with her strengths. Some of the works heard during the two-hour meeting were studies by Dupont, Popper, and Piatti, as well as a cello concerto by Davidov. In addition, the cellist lent Barber a stack of cello music from her library so that he could explore other works for the cello. Garbousova was a very accomplished cellist who seemed to have no technical limits, and enjoyed the high register of the cello, expressive playing, and bravura works. Her only request was that the concerto be finished by May so she could learn the new work during the summer. Garbousova and Barber stayed in very close contact during the following months, and as Barber completed a passage or another, he sent it to Garbousova for comments. On occasion she suggested changes. Sometimes their correspondence crossed in the mail, and by the time Garbousova sent her recommendations for changes in the music, Barber would have already replaced the passage.

This was a challenging time for Barber, as he had been drafted into the military and held a desk job. During this time he advocated with his friends, including Koussevitzky, to write letters supporting his early discharge from the military due to his contribution to the American culture. Eventually he received his discharge in September 1945. While working on the piece, Barber kept Mr. Brown informed of the concerto's progress, and requested his commission fee. Perhaps his prior experience with Mr. Felt taught Barber that problems with patrons could arise at any point, and a little courting might go a long way. Mr. Brown replied in a letter that he

had been apprised of the concerto's progress by Raya Garbousova, as she had visited him a week earlier. He also enclosed a check with the commission fee.<sup>[5]</sup>

The orchestration of the concerto took longer than expected due to several trips related to performances of his or Menotti's works. A reading of the concerto was arranged for January 1946 in a private New York home. The following month, Barber and Garbousova played it for Koussevitzky at his apartment. Perhaps due to the serious technical challenges of the work, Garbousova was not quite ready, and she asked Austrian born pianist and conductor Frederic Waldmann to rehearse with her. The concerto was prepared within a week. While Barber was generally not in favor of cadenzas in concerti, he included several in the cello concerto, perhaps as a tribute to Garbousova's technique. After the premiere, Barber cello concerto was praised by such critics as Virgil Thompson and Olin Downs, and he received the Music Critic's Circle Award. A year later, after a subsequent performance by Garbousova, with Mitropoulos as the conductor, Downs changed his mind and criticized the concerto for its seemingly indistinct shape. Barber, in a letter to Homer, justified it by describing the energy and enthusiasm present at all rehearsals, followed by the somewhat duller opening night performance due, possibly, to slower tempi.<sup>[6]</sup>

The cello part is exceptionally difficult, featuring long runs up the fingerboard, arpeggios, harmonics and pizzicatos, many chords and double stops in extended passages, and complex rhythms. Also employed are sudden register changes, long shifts, and the use of the extreme high register of the cello. Barber undertook revisions on several occasions. In 1947, he made several changes in the orchestration, including reduced instrumental doubling,

more transparent accompaniment, and simplified rhythmic figures to take the edge off of some of the orchestral accompaniment. Most of these changes occurred in the first movement with positive results, allowing the cello part to come through more clearly. In the first movement, Barber also added twelve measures at the beginning of the development to bring back some material from the exposition. Right before the publication, Barber felt one more change was necessary: the addition of thirteen measures to the orchestra and a clarification of the texture between the solo cello and the orchestra, which prior featured alternating rapid chords, and now adding the cello for only the final four measures. Barber was so motivated to make this change that he offered to pay publisher G. Schirmer, Inc. the added cost of changing the printing plates.

In 1950, Zara Nelsova recorded the concerto with Barber conducting. Barber had no conducting experience, and prior to the recording he travelled to Europe to study with Nikolai Malko. Barber was rather pleased with the new changes in the orchestration, and was delighted with Nelsova's tempo in the third movement, which was finally to his liking<sup>[7]</sup>. Broder tells us about an incident that occurred during the recordings of the concerto in London in 1950: "At one of the sessions, the soloist ended with great brilliance, whereupon a cellist from the orchestra leaped up from his chair, ran down to the front of the stage, wildly shouting something about giving up the cello after hearing playing such as Nelsova's, and smashed his instrument against the side of the platform. Strings and bits of wood flew in all directions. There was a general uproar, and then Barber and Nelsova realized that the whole thing was a joke staged by the cello section as a tribute to the difficulty of the concerto. Each man

had contributed to buying a cello in a pawn shop in order to smash it.”<sup>[8]</sup> Both Garbousova and Nelsova played the concerto many times during the 1950s; Leonard Rose, who also performed it several times, declared it the most difficult concerto he’d ever played<sup>[9]</sup>. My cello teacher, the late Orlando Cole, enjoyed telling the story of further changes he recommended to Barber to include in the first movement, including replacing some parallel thirds to parallel sixths, and some tempo changes. Barber agreed to the suggestions, trusting his longtime friend.

### **Concerto for Piano and Orchestra, op. 38 (1962)**

At the request of publisher G. Schirmer, Inc., Barber agreed to write a piano concerto to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reputable publishing house. The first performance of the concerto was scheduled for 1962 to coincide with the opening of the Lincoln Center in New York. From the beginning, the intended soloist for the piano concerto was John Browning. Barber was familiar with Browning’s playing from his debut with the New York Philharmonic in February 1956. The New York Philharmonic had scheduled in the same concert Barber’s *Medea’s Meditation and Dance of Vengeance*<sup>[10]</sup>. In preparation, Barber attended all rehearsals and heard Browning play the *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* by Rachmaninov. The concerto is dedicated to Manfred Ibel, a German art student and amateur flute player with whom Barber developed an intimate friendship, and with whom he shared time travelling.

Early in the composition process, Barber invited Browning to his house, “The Capricorn,” where Browning played his entire learned repertoire. Browning, in an interview with Barbara Heyman<sup>[11]</sup> recalled

Barber’s fondness for Chopin, Scriabin, Debussy, and Rachmaninov. Browning had been a student of Rosina Lhevinne, a famous Russian piano teacher who had a rigorous system of technical exercises. Lhevinne’s system included playing scales two octaves apart to create a bright sound, scales in double sixths, and a special technique to create tone colors, such as the use of the flutter pedal, which is a rapid shifting of the pedal so the sound stays transparent.

Barber set to work on the concerto, and following the completion of the first two movements he invited conductor Erich Leinsdorf to his house to hear Browning play them. Initially, the first movement featured a delicate ending, which Leinsdorf did not favor. Barber, perhaps too eager to please, responded within two days with a new spectacular ending featuring the full orchestra and the piano, much to provide a contrast to the delicate second movement.

The second movement is based on a piece for flute and piano written in 1959 for Ibel. The piece was initially entitled “Elegy” and later renamed “Canzone,” like the title of the second movement in the concerto. The piano concerto version is very close to the original flute piece, only longer by twenty-six measures. The first theme, originally played by the flute, is distributed in the orchestra between the flute, oboe, and solo piano. Much of the piano accompaniment is divided between the strings and harp. In this movement, Barber shows his exceptional sense of melodic line, and his ability to spin great tunes. The added section is mainly a repeat of the opening of the movement orchestrated more colorfully, with the piano playing shimmering arpeggios.

The premiere of the concerto was scheduled for September 24, 1962. Barber fell behind due to his sister’s death in July 1961, and an invitation in the spring of 1962 to speak to congress of Soviet

composers. The third movement was completed only on September 9, 1962, two weeks before the premiere. Changes in the parts were made up to the day before the concert. Browning skillfully learned and memorized the third movement in the short amount of time available. As in the first movement, the third movement is fiendishly difficult. One of the pieces Browning played for Barber was *Les Fées sont d'exquises danseuses* by Debussy, which seemed to have inspired certain passages in the third movement<sup>[12]</sup>. Other influences can be attributed to Horowitz. Before the premiere, Browning, accompanied by Barber, went to Horowitz to play work for him. One particular passage seemed to irk Horowitz – a passage of rising seconds in 16<sup>th</sup> notes (3 measures before no. 32), which was declared unplayable at the required tempo. Barber took the advice seriously, and changed the passage to eighth notes. The original manuscript can be found at the Library of Congress. Other changes suggested by Horowitz were four measures before number 15, where passages of cascading 32<sup>nd</sup> notes were changed to eighth notes.

The final result is a concerto that is both spectacular and lyrical, a piece that shows mastery of form, and exceptional skill in orchestration. It is particularly difficult for the piano, and the last movement, written in 5/8, gives unusual problems to most accomplished orchestras. Hailed by both musicians and critics as a masterpiece, the Piano Concerto received a Pulitzer Prize in 1963 and the Music Critics Circle Award in 1964.

The three concerti by Samuel Barber show a clear influence exerted by the performers for whom they were intended. Barber's dialogue with them and other performers led to three masterpieces which are musically rewarding, structurally balanced, and which display an idiomatic technique for all solo instruments.

#### Notes

- [<sup>1</sup>] Nathan Broder, *Samuel Barber* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1956), p 35.  
 [<sup>2</sup>] Ibid.  
 [<sup>3</sup>] Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber. The Composer and His Music* (Oxford University Press, New York. Oxford, 1992), p. 193.  
 [<sup>4</sup>] Ibid, p. 195.  
 [<sup>5</sup>] Ibid, p. 251.  
 [<sup>6</sup>] Ibid. 257-8.  
 [<sup>7</sup>] Ibid. p. 260.  
 [<sup>8</sup>] Richard E Rodda,  
[http://musicfestival.com/new/reference/prognotes/prognotes2006/august17\\_2006.html](http://musicfestival.com/new/reference/programnotes/prognotes2006/august17_2006.html)  
 [<sup>9</sup>] Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber. The Composer and His Music* (Oxford University Press, New York. Oxford, 1992), p.260.  
 [<sup>10</sup>] Ibid. p. 411.  
 [<sup>11</sup>] Ibid. p. 412.  
 [<sup>12</sup>] Ibid. p. 416.

#### References

1. Heyman, Barbara B. (1992) *Samuel Barber. The Composer and His Music* Oxford University Press, New York. Oxford, .260.
2. Broder, Nathan (1956) *Samuel Barber*. New York: G. Schirmer.