Samuel Barber's String Quartet, Opus 11

The powerfully spiritual *Adagio for Strings* by American composer Samuel Barber is familiar to most people even if they can't name the piece they are listening to. This iconic work premiered on an NBC radio broadcast on November 5, 1938 with Arturo Toscanini conducting the NBC Symphony Orchestra. The work is thought to embody feelings of profound loss and grief. It was played at the funerals of Franklin Delanor Roosevelt and Albert Einstein; it was broadcast to the nation when John F. Kennedy was assassinated; and it was played by orchestras around the globe in the wake of the 9/11 tragedies. It has been featured on commercials and in soundtracks to motion pictures, most famously Oliver Stone's 1986 Vietnam War film, *Platoon*. The work's power is in its simplicity and depth of feeling. With its stepwise sinews of b-flat minor, woven together in a large dramatic arch, there are few works like the *Adagio* that have such direct access to our emotions.

However, most people who *could* actually name Barber's *Adagio* from hearing it probably are not aware that the piece is an arrangement of the second movement of his String Quartet from 1936. While some interpretations of the *Adagio* can sound positively Mahlerian in sound, Barber himself originally intended for the *Adagio* to be an intimate experience to be performed by a string quartet. Additionally, as a middle movement, he intended there to be music before and after it. What about the rest of the piece? How did the Quartet come about?

It seems that even a composer as distinguished, refined, and erudite as Samuel Barber found humor in the old fashioned "poop joke." Ironically, a work that possesses the sublime *Adagio* had a rather scatological beginning! The Quartet is first mentioned in a letter to the cellist Orlando Cole on May 6, 1936. Barber writes, "I have vague quartettish rumblings in my innards and need a bit of celestial Ex Lax to restore my equilibrium; there is nothing to do but get at it, and I will send the excrements to you by registered mail by August…"

This letter was written from Rome where the 26-year-old Barber had just spent a year studying at the American Academy in the ancient city, thanks to the *Prix de Rome* he had received in the Spring of 1935.[1] Barber was aware that Orlando Cole's quartet, the Curtis Quartet, was planning a European tour in the late months of 1936 and he wanted to write a piece for them to play in Italy. Thanks to an extension of his traveling Pulitzer fellowship, he was able to remain in Europe for the summer and into the fall of 1936.[2] Barber, along with his colleague and partner Gian Carlo Menotti, lived in a cabin in the town of St. Wolfgang, Austria from May 15 to November 1. It was a blissful summer of solitude for the two young composers and they were able to work uninterrupted. "We are very inaccessible and able to work in

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[1] Bizarrely, he had applied for the award in the previous year with the submission of his Cello Sonata (written for Cole) and *Music for a Scene of Shelley* and was rejected. In the year that he won the prize, he submitted the same works to the same jury, only under the pseudonym of "John Brandywine!"

[2] In fact, at twenty-six, Barber was already a well-decorated composer. He had won the Bearns Prize from Columbia University in 1929 for his Violin Sonata, and again in 1933 for his Overture to *The School for Scandal.* He received a Pulitzer fellowship in 1935 and his compositions began to be published by G. Schirmer, Inc. that same year, beginning with his youthful Opus 2 songs, "The Daisies," "With rue my heart is laden," and "Bessie Bobtail." His compositions were being played by orchestras like the New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra and even heard on national radio broadcasts. Barber was a major player in the new school of American composers along with young mavericks like Roy Harris, Roger Sessions, William Schumann and Aaron Copland. However, among them Barber was unique in that he would never leave the sound world of the Romantic period.

peace," Barber would write to Cole on July 15. It was in this cabin in St. Wolfgang where the majority of the Quartet was composed.

The first and second movements were put down on paper without much strain from the young composer. In a letter to Cole from the late summer, Barber was feeling quite optimistic about the Quartet's middle movement. As the musicologist Barbara Heyman points out in her seminal biography of Barber, "On 19 September, with uncanny prescience about a work that in its orchestral arrangement would be considered one of the sublime masterpieces of the twentieth century, Barber announced to Cole: 'I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout! Now for a finale.'"

For most composers, these seemingly harmless four words, "Now for a finale," have proven to be easier said than done. It seems that if your name is Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or Boulez, you have struggled at some point in wrapping up your piece with an effective concluding movement. Barber was certainly no exception and the final movement of his Quartet proved to be a thorn in his side for years. Even with the Quartet going swimmingly in mid-summer, Barber knew that it would not be ready for the Curtis String Quartet's tour of Europe. In a letter to Cole on the last day of August, Barber wrote, "It is coming along slowly, but will not be ready in time. The best thing will probably be for me to have it tried out by the Rome Quartet in rehearsal, and then I can send it over to you from Rome."

Undoubtedly, Barber was disappointed that the Curtis Quartet was not going to be able to premier the new work. Felix Lamond, the head of composition at the American Academy in Rome, had already engaged the Belgian Pro Arte Quartet for the job. This did not please Barber as he had recently heard a recording of the Schubert Cello Quintet with the Pro Arte and he found it very unsatisfactory. The premier went ahead on December 14 in Rome at the Villa Aurelia, one day after the premier of his First Symphony (also in Rome by the Philharmonic Augusteo Orchestra). He *had* finished the final movement in time for the premier but was dissatisfied and retracted it for revision immediately following the performance. A trip back to the United States from January 15 to April 24, 1937 for the American premier of his First Symphony with the Cleveland Orchestra under Artur Rodzinsky put the revisions on hold.

For years, the third movement continued to be a peccadillo for Barber. After an important performance at the Library of Congress on April 20, 1937 by the Gordon Quartet and several performances from the Curtis Quartet around America, Barber finally gave up and scrapped the final movement all together. Very telling is a review by Howard Taubman of *The New York Times* from a performance by the Curtis Quartet in Town Hall on March 15, 1938. Taubman felt that the first movement showed "virility and dramatic impact" and the second movement was "the finest of the work, deeply felt and written with economy, resourcefulness and distinction." The last movement did not receive such praise, being in Taubman's words, "a scrappy working out of unexciting ideas…"

The Barber Quartet's finale ended up being a cut-and-paste job. Barber literally cut the ending from the first movement and pasted it as a postscript to the second movement. Actually, the Quartet in its ultimate form does not possess a finale per se. The original ending to the first movement is to be played *attaca* after the second movement. In sense, the Quartet is a lopsided palindrome. The premiere of the

Quartet in its final form was given by the Budapest String Quartet at the Library of Congress in January of 1943.

Program note by Jesse Holstein, March 2009