



American Classics

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BARBER

Solo Piano Music

Sonata, Op. 26 • Excursions, Op. 20

Three Sketches • Souvenirs

Daniel Pollack, Piano



Samuel Barber (1910-1981) Complete Published Piano Music

Samuel Barber was born on 9th March, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. His father was a physician and his mother a sister of the famous American contralto, Louise Homer. From the age of six his musical gifts were apparent, and when he was thirteen he was accepted as one of the first students to attend the newly established Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. There he studied composition with Rosario Scalerò, piano with Isabelle Vengerova and singing with Emilio de Gogorza. Although he had written his first compositions when he was seven. He only undertook serious composition at the age of eighteen. Recognition of his gifts as a composer came quickly. In 1933 the Philadelphia Orchestra played his *Overture to The School for Scandal* and in 1935 the New York Philharmonic presented his *Music for a Scene from Shelley*. Both early compositions won considerable acclaim. Between 1935 and 1937 Barber was awarded the American Prix de Rome and the Pulitzer Prize and achieved overnight fame on 5th November 1938, when Arturo Toscanini conducted the NBC Symphony Orchestra in the *Essay for Orchestra No. 1* and *Adagio for Strings*. The *Adagio* became one of the most popular American works of serious music, and through some lurid aberration of circumstance, also became a favourite work for American state funerals and as background for death scenes in movies. During World War II, Barber served in the Army Air Corps and composed his *Second*

Symphony on commission from the Air Force. He wrote three operas, *Vanessa*, awarded the 1958 Pulitzer Prize and *A Hand of Bridge* with libretti by his friend Gian Carlo Menotti and *Antony and Cleopatra* with a libretto based on Shakespeare by Franco Zeffirelli, two ballets, *Medea* and *Souvenirs*, three *Essays* for orchestra, two symphonies, concertos for violin, piano and cello, many vocal works, chamber music and works for piano, as well as choral compositions. His music has been called romantic, yet his technical idiom is decidedly modern. His melodies are broadly songful; his harmonies are opulent; his orchestration is resplendent with colour. In the words of David Ewen, "*As Barber's talent ripened, he added poetic feeling to his lyricism. And, towards the end of his life there was a growing intensity and strength of idiom in his writing. But his lyricism always remained on a high plane of eloquence; and the emotional factor never was sacrificed.*" He died on 23rd January 1981 in New York after ill health that had involved hospitalization on various occasions and a stroke.

In his obituary for the New York Times, Donald Henahan wrote: "*Throughout his career, Samuel Barber was hounded by success. Probably no other American composer enjoyed such early, persistent and such long lasting acclaim... One reason for the acceptance won by Mr. Barber's music apart from its undeniable craft and thorough professionalism — was its*

deep-seated conservatism, which audiences could find congenial even at first hearing. Although he often dealt in pungent dissonances and complex rhythms, like most of his twentieth-century contemporaries, there was a lyrical quality even to his strictly instrumental pieces that from the first established him as a neo-Romantic...

Barber's solo instrumental compositions include works for piano, two pianos, carillon and organ. Of these, twenty-nine works have yet to be published. The remaining eleven works comprise one suite for carillon, one set of variations for organ, and nine compositions for piano. All nine solo piano works are recorded on this disc. Of the unpublished compositions, with the exception of one work, *After the Concert* (c.1973), all were composed before 1932. Of the published piano compositions, the earliest are his *Three Sketches* (1923-24). He published the three short pieces himself in 1924 and distributed the scores to friends and family. Various copies eventually ended up in a number of prominent American music libraries, and since 1969 have appeared in print in a variety of editions (Schaum Publications, Alfred Publishing Company, and in the magazine *Keyboard Classics*). The first piece in the set is called *Love Song*. This 24-bar-long, nostalgic waltz, written in April 1924, is dedicated to Barber's mother. The second piece is entitled, *To My Steinway*. Only 15-bars long, this sweet waltz-like *adagio* was written in June 1923 and is dedicated *To Number 220601*, his prized childhood instrument. The last piece in the group, *Minuet*, was composed in April 1923, and is based on Beethoven's *Minuet No. 2, WoO 10*. He

dedicated this piece to his beloved younger sister, Sara, for whom he composed some of his earliest songs.

Chronologically, the next work is the *Interlude No. 1*, composed in 1931. Although it is an early work, and a product of Barber's years at the Curtis Institute, it was only published by Schirmer in 1993. This rhapsodic work owes much to the brooding romanticism of Brahms and Reger, but is clearly written in a tonal language that is without a doubt of the twentieth century. Barber revels in the full range of the keyboard, demanding wide stretches in both hands from the pianist. The work is dedicated to Jeanne Behrend, American pianist and fellow student at the Curtis Institute.

The composer gave the first performance of this work at the Twenty-Fifth Students' Concert of the Curtis Institute of Music on 12th May 1932. That same evening he also gave the first performance of his chamber piece, *Dover Beach, Opus 3*, for baritone and string quartet to words by Matthew Arnold.

Although Vladimir Horowitz is always credited with having given the first performance of the four *Excursions, Opus 20*, in reality he only gave the première of three of the pieces. Barber composed them largely at the behest of Jeanne Behrend, who as early as 1938 pressed the composer to write a "*longish piece*" for piano. The work was begun in June, 1942 and completed in September 1944. In May 1944 Behrend performed the first in the set on WQXR Radio in New York. By July 1944, Barber had provided *Excursion I, III and IV* for Vladimir Horowitz,

who played them on 4th January 1945 at a concert at the Philadelphia Academy of Music. He performed them again on 28th March 1945 at Carnegie Hall in New York. It was left to Jeanne Behrend to become the first pianist to play the complete set, on 22nd December 1948 at New York Times Hall. In his explanatory note to the 1945 G. Schirmer published score, Barber wrote: "*These are Excursions in small classical forms into regional American idioms. Their regional characteristics, as well as their sources in folk material and their scoring, reminiscent of local instruments, are easily recognized.*" The first in the set is in the form of a boogie-woogie. The second is harmonically, melodically and rhythmically in "blues" style. The third piece is a set of variations reminiscent of Latin American popular music. According to James Sifferman, *Excursion IV* suggests "*the limited vocabulary of the mouth organ or harmonica*" reminding us of American barn-dances and indigenous fiddle playing.

One of the great landmarks of American piano music is Barber's monumental *Sonata for Piano, Opus 26*. This was commissioned in the autumn of 1947 by Irving Berlin and Richard Rodgers in honour of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the League of Composers. Although Barber found it relatively easy to begin composing the work, it took him nearly two years to complete it. The holograph score at the Library of Congress shows the completion date of June 1949. Its première in New York on 23rd January 1950 by Vladimir Horowitz turned the musical world on its ears. Horowitz, who was undoubtedly

intrigued by its ferocious technical demands, quickly became Barber's most vocal supporter, claiming the sonata was "*the first truly great native work in the form.*" The technically demanding work for a while frightened many professional pianists away, but no serious musician could ignore the work for long and it soon became the most played American piano composition and a required work at piano competitions throughout the world. Despite Horowitz's close association with the sonata, the work was actually not written with him in mind. In an interview on WQXR with Robert Sherman, Barber declared that he had no particular pianists in mind when he began writing the work: "*I just started to write a sonata.*" Regardless, the support and numerous performances by Horowitz only strengthened the work's impact and eventual place in the musical hall of fame. In the New York Times Olin Downes wrote: "*We consider it the first sonata really to come of age by an American composer of this period. It has intense feeling as well as constructive power and intellectual maturity. It is stated naturally and convincingly in the language of modern music.*" The sonata is in four movements. The first of these begins with a steel-fingered chromaticism, through which flickers a poignant, lyrical theme. It is answered by a brusque fragment built up from dissonant intervals. At the movement's conclusion the left hand ends in an angry grumble, while the right evaporates in a mist of feathery, upward strokes. The second movement is a sort of super-*scherzo* that might be described as happy, were it not so hysterical. In the words of

the musicologist Charles Briefer, "*The germinal element is akin to feathery strokes that ended the first movement, though here they are inverted into a downward loop. The same "feathers" form themselves into helpless bird cries at the outset of the third movement, while a theme tries to assert itself in the left hand. A treble melody appears which seems related to the lyric theme that opened the first movement. Suddenly there is a distinct shift in mood and character. The pervading chromaticism is gone, leaving behind a quiet, almost Hindemithian aura of neo-classicism to fade away to nothing. The fourth and final movement, a fugue ...is by far the most dazzling and concise of the four movements: with its immense energy and barely a pause for breath, it hurtles to its violent, and cataclysmic end.*" When Francis Poulenc heard Barber's *Sonata* in 1950, he remarked: "*The Sonata pleases me without reserve. It is a remarkable work from both the musical and instrumental point of view. In turn, tragical, joyous and songful, it ends up with a fantastically difficult to play fugue. Bursting with energy, this finale knocks you out in (something less than) five minutes!*"

The *Souvenirs*, *Opus 28*, were originally composed for piano four-hands in 1951. Barber then arranged the score for piano solo and orchestrated it as a ballet in 1952. In 1952, Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale made an arrangement of the work for two pianos as well. When the four-hand score was published by G. Schirmer in 1954, Barber provided the following introduction: "*In 1952 I was writing some duets for one piano to play with a friend, and Lincoln*

Kirstein suggested I orchestrate them for a ballet. Commissioned by the Ballet Society, the suite consists of a waltz, schottische, pas de deux, two-step, hesitation tango, and galop. One might 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; Souvenirs — remembered with affection, not in irony or with tongue in cheek, but in amused tenderness." Although the critics initially received the work as "*airy, gracious, inventive, and lighthearted*" and "*a facile trifle,*" when the ballet version received its first performance at the New York City Ballet on 15th November 1955, Francis Herridge, reviewing it for the New York Post, understood Barber's satirical intentions: "*Souvenirs is a thoroughly engaging potpourri of Mack Sennett bathing girls, thin-mustached Lotharios and bloodthirsty vampires... A series of brief sketches includes a spoof on the Irene Castle dance styles, a hotel hallway farce, three wall-flowers at a dance, a bedroom seduction, and an afternoon on the beach.*"

Barber's *Nocturne, Opus 33*, was composed in 1959 and is subtitled *Homage to John Field*. Although it was the Irish pianist and composer John Field who created the form of the nocturne, it was Chopin who realised its fullest possibilities as a medium of expressing some of the most sensitive and poetic thoughts. Barber's neo-romantic harmonies, along with exquisite filigree passages, make this dreamy and highly pianistic work one of the composer's most ethereal creations. It was first performed in 1959 in San Diego, California by John Browning.

The *Ballade, Opus 46*, commissioned in August 1974 by the Van Cliburn Foundation for its fifth Van Cliburn International Quadrennial Piano Competition, was completed by Barber in 1977. After a long time away from the piano, he returned to it with great difficulty, taking eight or nine months to complete the commission at a time in his life when he felt sombre and out of place. His beloved Capricorn (his home in Mount Kisco, New York) was sold and he had moved to

a spacious apartment in New York City, overlooking Central Park. He felt restless and depressed, and the *Ballade* reflects his mental state. The opening chordal material surges restlessly, while the middle section explodes in virtuosity. The work closes after recapitulating the opening section and mysteriously concludes, *pianissimo*. Deceptively simple and compact, it is a work of deeply moving musical expression.

Daniel Pollack

Daniel Pollack was born in Los Angeles on 23rd January, 1935, and began his studies at the age of four. Two years later, he was accepted into the "prodigy" class of the legendary Ethel Leginska, herself a pupil of Theodore Leschetizky. At the age of nine he made his début with the New York Philharmonic performing Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor*. He subsequently studied with Jacob Gimpel followed by Lillian Steuber he was accepted until, at the age of seventeen as a full scholarship student in the class of the legendary Mme. Rosina Lhevinne at the Juilliard School in New York. After receiving his Masters Degree from Juilliard, Pollack received a Fulbright Scholarship for graduate studies at the Vienna Academie für Musik in the class of Professor Bruno Seidelhofer. Other teachers have included Wilhem Kempff, Guido Agosti, and Ilona Kabos. At the age of 23, Pollack, already a

veteran of numerous prizes and competitions, garnered international recognition when he became a prize-winner in the First International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition in Moscow. In fact, his performance of Samuel Barber's *Sonata* became the sensation of that 1958 competition and a subsequent recording on the Melodiya label became a highly collectable souvenir. Pollack has performed not only in the United States, but in Europe, Asia, South America and Africa. He has appeared as a soloist with almost all of the world's greatest orchestras, and in most of the greatest concert halls. Among his unique honours, he has performed on demand on International Competition juries and has served on the visiting faculties of The Juilliard School and Yale University's School of Music. He is currently professor of piano at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.



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STEREO

Samuel
BARBER

(1910-1981)

Complete Published Solo Piano Music

Daniel Pollack, Piano

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Playing
Time
72:16**Sonata for Piano,
Op. 26 (1949)**

(18:12)

- 1 Allegro energico 6:28
 2 Allegro vivace e leggiero 1:49
 3 Adagio mesto 5:20
 4 Fuga: Allegro con spirito 4:30

**Excursions, Op. 20
(1942-44)**

(14:46)

- 5 Un poco allegro 3:01
 6 In slow blues tempo 5:24
 7 Allegretto 3:36
 8 Allegro molto 2:41

**Nocturne, Op. 33 (1959)
(Homage to John Field)**

- 9 Moderato 3:56

**Three Sketches
(1923-24)**

(3:00)

- 10 Lovesong: Tempo di valse:
Allegretto 0:50

- 11 To My Steinway
(To No. 220601): Adagio 1:00
 12 Minuet: Tempo di minuetto 1:09

Interlude I

("For Jeanne") (1931)

- 13 Adagio, ma non troppo 6:19

Ballade, Op. 46 (1977)

- 14 Restless 5:56

**Souvenirs, Op. 28
(1951-52)**

(19:15)

- 15 Waltz: Tempo di valse,
Allegro con brio 4:03
 16 Schottische: Tempo di
Schottische, Allegro
ma non troppo 2:22
 17 Pas de deux: Adagio 3:58
 18 Two-Step: Allegro molto 1:56
 19 Hesitation Tango: Con moto 3:45
 20 Galop: Allegro molto 3:03

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