

Martina Arroyo's Reflections on Samuel Barber

In 1963, the New York Philharmonic commissioned Samuel Barber to compose *Andromache's Farewell*. At the time, I had performed only in supporting roles at the Met, but was still relatively unknown. Many think *Andromache* was written for me from the start, but that is not so. Mr. Barber had already started to write it when he heard my audition with the conductor Thomas Schippers. Mr. Barber liked warm voices with floating tones and he thought I could do long pianissimos and crescendo into forte passages, so the part became mine.

When I first sang *Andromache* for Mr. Barber, he commented, "So, that's how it sounds." This statement surprised me. Having labored to create the work, I assumed the composer already knew how it would sound. But, as Mr. Barber observed, "Until the voice breathes life into the music, you are never quite sure what it will be." He had a great respect for performers and what they contributed to his work.

Mr. Barber was very involved in my preparation for this role. He was present at rehearsals and we often worked at his home in Mount Kisco. Mr. Barber even took me to the great Valentina, who designed for Garbo, to be fitted for a costume. [I couldn't afford a new one, so I used one made for me by designer, Malek of Vienna. Valentina added yards and yards of fabric in the royal color purple to be used as a stole and commanded me to, "Take the floor to you." Mr. Barber instructed me to tell myself, "I am a queen." Both directions were their ways of helping me achieve the majestic carriage needed for the part.]

Mr. Barber was very focused on character development and color. Today, when performing Barber's work, singers often become too obsessed with the intricate rhythms. While rehearsing the part of *Andromache*, Mr. Barber specifically told me about one phrase, "I don't care about rhythm, I want there to be anger." I encourage students to sing Barber, not only because the music is beautiful, but also because the characters created in his music are so distinctive and well defined.

I sang *Andromache* all the over the United States and Europe with great success. The text from Euripides is wonderful. Creating the role for the premier is one of the highlights of my life – not only because it was a big success, but also because it represented a collaboration with Mr. Barber, Maestro Schippers, and the New York Philharmonic.

Years later I sang excerpts from Mr. Barber's *Antony & Cleopatra* with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. After many compliments Mr. Barber said to me, "Thank you for letting the people hear my music." He often felt, that at its premier production at the Metropolitan Opera, the music was overlooked given all that was happening on the stage. He always said "Thank you," always without arrogance and with no need of the spotlight.

Mr. Barber was handsome, calm, reassuring - a genteel Southern gentleman. I once asked him to marry me, but couldn't hear the answer over the laughter.

In 1998, I sang the role again in Eugene Oregon for the 35th anniversary performance of *Andromache's Farewell*. I was shocked to realize how long it had been since the premiere. It was still in my repertoire and my heart.