

“Writing Songs. . . . a natural thing to do”

by Barbara B. Heyman

I never met Samuel Barber—he died a year before I began work on his biography in 1982. But in the 25 years we’ve been cohabitating, as it were, I have come to know intimately his voice, his aspirations, his struggles, and his heartaches — primarily through his letters, his diaries, and interviews with classmates, family, friends, and performers who knew and worked him.

Barber was one of a generation that wrote and kept letters, and he was a prolific and eloquent writer. His classmates, his parents, his friends, his lovers, all kept his letters and were generous in making them available to me. Many of the performers who premiered his music were eager to share their recollections of Barber and his advice on performance of his music. He had a unique way of working with artists—a collaborative relationship, whereby he wrote to the strengths and predilections of those who would premiere his music.

In his heart Barber was a singer. From the age of five he expressed his creativity primarily through song—one might say that virtually all his instrumental music is vocally inspired as well. In his words, “writing songs just seemed a natural thing to do.” Indeed, even his earliest efforts, some of which are presented in this Festival, display the strengths that characterized his mature works: an intuitive gift for shaping a melody, a command of form, a perfectly natural correspondence between rhythm of the music and the words, and a felicitous interplay between the vocal line and accompaniment. These are the attributes that singers find so gratifying.

When the 14-year old Barber entered the newly founded Curtis Institute of Music in 1924, he soon distinguished himself as a pianist, a composer, and a singer, and at 16 he received special permission to hold a triple major. Songs were created with great facility during 1926–27: “I spend much more time looking for the poems than setting them,” he wrote in his diary during that time. Before that summer he set mostly American and the English romantic poets. During the summer of 1927 he discovered the “hobo poet” James Stephens and later James Joyce and W.B. Yeats.

Aiding and abetting Barber's mission were his maternal aunt, the famous opera singer, Louise Homer, and her husband, the composer Sidney Homer. Homer is one of the heroes in Barber’s story: the wisdom and optimism that he transmitted to his nephew for more than twenty-five years fostered Sam Barber's mission, supported his inclination to adhere unwaveringly to the Romantic style, and inspired the direction of his intellectual development. It is rare that a mentor can sustain his influence for as long as Homer did.

Many of the songs performed in this festival were composed by Barber in his teens and some—“A Slumber Song for the Madonna,” “The Watchers,” “The Daisies,” for example—were sung by Louise Homer on her national tours, receiving rave reviews:

That he was a singer himself was undoubtedly one reason why Barber could write so empathetically for the voice. Every singer I interviewed—his classmate Rose Bampton, Eleanor Steber, Martina Arroyo, among others—remarked on how gratifying it was to sing Barber's songs, and they praised his intelligent choice of texts. His music is vividly expressive of the emotional climate of the words for he uses harmonic color to underscore the bittersweet poetry. As Leontyne Price put it: “It falls intellectually to the mind and beautifully on the ear—a rare combination.” About Barber’s songs in general, and *Hermit*

Songs in particular, the composer William Schuman wrote to his friend: "In this sphere of composing you are alone!"

Barber had a meteoric rise to fame. During the mid-twentieth century, his music—along with Copland's — was the most frequently played of American composers in Europe and the Americas. He was one of only a handful who could make a living entirely by composing. He won many prizes and received many important commissions. If his music was less popular during the late 1960s and '70s, it was not — as some would have you believe — merely because of the vitriolic reception of the overblown, accident-prone, Zeffirelli production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, but rather the result of a growing trend toward a more experimental style. Yet, to set the record straight, Barber's royalty statements from the sixties to the end of his life in 1981 suggest that his stature and the frequency of performances of his music did not wane at all.

Although many view Barber as a conservative in the reactionary sense, rather I consider him a *conservator*. A telling inscription appears on the last page of a sketchbook he kept during his student years at the Curtis Institute of Music in the 1920s and '30s:

*There is a degree of innovation beyond which one does not pass without danger
— Lamartine had the gift of seizing the exact point of permissible innovation.*

These are *Franz Liszt's* words, but surely they are Barber's *credo*. He knew just how far to go without disrupting the continuity with tradition.

Barber brought new vitality to the harmonic language of the late nineteenth century, infusing elements of twentieth-century modernism—dissonance and even serialism—without compromising lyrical expression. Melody is central. Yet, even though he was never compelled to rebel against conventional musical practices, the personal voice that pervades his music is very much of his time. What T.S. Eliot referred to as "the generous influence of tradition." Today his music gains new significance within the current trend of the New Romanticism.

Musicologist and editor Barbara B. Heyman is the author of the award-winning Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music (Oxford University Press, 1992, 1994). Her Comprehensive Thematic Catalog of the Complete Works of Samuel Barber is forthcoming next year, and she is working on a revised, expanded edition of the biography as well as the Collected Letters of Samuel Barber.

A pianist, Heyman earned a B.A. from Barnard College, an M.S. from Columbia University, and after a twenty-year hiatus—during which she raised four children and had the audacity to pursue violin studies—she earned a master's degree at Queens College and a Ph.D. from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, both in musicology. (She had the distinction of going directly from eligibility for student rush tickets to senior discounts non-stop.)