

Notes on Samuel Barber *by Margo Garrett*

Of all the American song I have played and taught, it is always that of Samuel Barber that touches me most deeply. I never tire of any of it - especially teaching the "Hermit Songs", which certainly I have done more than a hundred times by now. And who among us Americans cannot identify with "Knoxville Summer: 1915"? As a Southern post-World War II child, I thrill to share not only this unique, magnetic musical work, but also share so much of my own personal culture and memory. Barber's lessons to me were always musical, pianistic, literary, cultural and so very deeply personal. He left us with a large repertoire that is still being discovered. And I could go on about so many other instrumental and orchestral pieces...Be sure you listen to "Anthony and Cleopatra." Don't just read what the critics said. Listen yourselves. This work, so ill-received, is to my ear truly one of the finest of all English language operas ever written. The context for the work was all wrong, but not the work itself!

I found the man to be much like his music; sophisticated and erudite, a bit aloof and shy, steeped in the great European traditions of western music and culture and, oh, so Victorian - - American, that is. His lessons were simple in the final analysis - actually distilled into only one lesson: let the natural blending of the rhythm of an excellent poetic reading, bound to the shape of a specific singer's most beautiful phrasing, lead and shape the instrumental accompaniment while maintaining a strong and simple instrumental rhythm. Sounds contradictory, but it certainly was not, as he illustrated both vocally and at the piano. He was more conservative in his own singing performances than in those he coaxed out of the young colleagues I partnered in treasured lessons with him. He was a powerhouse of a pianist but a modest man who seemed shy to really "let go" at the piano in the studio. He never made a technical remark to me or to any singer I partnered, but he dwelt strongly on poetry and phrasing. These demands surprising changed our technical approaches and not only aided our performances of the work at hand, but our playing and singing in general. He was patient with youth and ineptness as long as he found passion and hunger to learn at work, but he dismissed, sometimes literally and angrily, those who evidenced no apparent passion or work ethic, even if there was interesting and ample technical prowess!

He was a sad man when I knew him. I so hope that in his hereafter, he knows that we still continue in ever increasing numbers to study and perform his works and that the world, not just the USA, feels a profound connection to and love for his music. He is the true leader of the American song movement of the Twentieth Century. He headed what history will look back on as being the era of the greatest flowering of American song.