

*FIRST ESSAY FOR ORCHESTRA, OP. 12* • SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)

SCORED FOR: 2 FLUTES, 2 OBOES, 2 CLARINETS, 2 BASSOONS, 4 HORNS, 3 TRUMPETS, 3 TROMBONES, TUBA, TIMPANI, PIANO, AND STRINGS.

Encouraged in music from a young age, American composer Samuel Barber displayed exceptional potential as a pianist and cellist. At age fourteen he enrolled in the newly founded Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he further honed his skills as a pianist and investigated the possibilities of composing. In short order, Barber realized that his true musical passion was composition. He progressed quickly, achieving rapid success in his new endeavor. Soon after his graduation from Curtis, his *School for Scandal Overture* was performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra.

In 1935 Barber was named the winner of the famous Prix de Rome composition award, a highly coveted prize that allowed composers to spend three years in Rome (with most expenses paid) engaging in musical studies and composition. This proved to be a fruitful time for Barber both in composition and in making musical connections; specifically his introduction to the famous Maestro Arturo Toscanini. During the summer of 1937 Toscanini was beginning his tenure as the conductor of the NBC Symphony Orchestra and he asked the orchestra supervisor, Artur Rodzinski, for suggestions of American works to perform. Rodzinski advised him to play a work by Barber. Toscanini agreed, but asked that he be given a new work to review. Barber, thrilled by the prospect, set to work and quickly completed his *First Essay for Orchestra*. He sent this, along with his *Adagio for Strings*, for Toscanini's review. Months passed and there was no word from the maestro. Finally the scores were returned to him without comment. A rather discouraged Barber began to search for other performance opportunities.

The following summer (1938) Barber and his friend Gian-Carlo Menotti were invited to visit the Toscaninis at their summer home in Italy. Barber, owing to his frustration with the maestro, refused to go. Menotti accepted the invitation and when Toscanini asked why Barber had not come, he claimed that Barber was ill. Toscanini immediately perceived the ruse and replied "He's perfectly well; he's just angry with me. But he has no reason to be—I'm going to do both of his pieces." Toscanini had returned the scores to Barber as a courtesy; he no longer needed them because he had already memorized them. True to his word, Toscanini conducted the premiere performances of the *First Essay* and the *Adagio for Strings* on the 5 November 1938 NBC Orchestra concert.

As to the reasoning behind the term "essay," Barber, declining to speak much about his music, simply referred to the Oxford English Dictionary definition: 'a composition of moderate length on a particular subject . . . more or less elaborate in style though limited in range.' In

this light there is no prescribed 'form' for an essay, only a logical chain of thought or sequence of events. The Op. 12 Essay, the first of three composed over the span of forty years, is essentially comprised of two sections. The first, marked *Andante sostenuto*, is broad and lyrical featuring the lower end of the instrumental spectrum. The second, by contrast, features instruments from the higher regions of the orchestra in a quick three-four time marked *Allegro molto*. The scherzo-like character of this section gives the feeling of perpetual motion as the various motives bounce from instrument to instrument. At the height of this section the cellos and horns recall thematic material from the first section while the chaotic scherzo material continues. A tremendous *rallentando* (a deliberate slowing of the tempo) is initiated by the timpani leading to a grand reprise of the majestic opening material. The trumpets continue in quasi-canonic imitation gradually dying away and intermingling with the violins who repeat the haunting last three notes of the theme.

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