

Barber

String Quartet, Op. 11

Molto Allegro e Appassionato

Adagio

Molto Adagio-Presto

String Quartet, Op. 11

Samuel Barber

Born March 9, 1910 in West Chester, Pennsylvania

Died January 23, 1981 in New York City

In May 1936 Barber wrote to his friend cellist Orlando Cole of the Curtis String Quartet: "I have vague quartettish rumblings in my innards and need a bit of celestial *Ex Lax* to restore my equilibrium; there is nothing to do but get at it, and I will send the excrements to you by registered mail—but no, I could continue with this figure into the realm of indecency..." Sophomoric composer-humor aside, writing a string quartet is difficult business. It is the most challenging form of ensemble music for composers, and Barber made painfully slow progress as he worked on his quartet in the Italian Alps that summer. In September he wrote to Cole: "I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout! Now for a Finale." He was right about the slow movement: arranged for string orchestra, the *Adagio* would be performed on national radio by Arturo Toscanini and become one of the most beloved and recorded pieces of music by a 20th century American composer. But finishing the rest of the work to his satisfaction proved problematic. He didn't have it ready in time for the Curtis Quartet to perform it on their European tour that fall as he had wished, so the premiere was given in Rome by the Pro Arte Quartet on December 14. Barber was still dissatisfied with the last movement, and withdrew it for revision before a planned performance at the Library of Congress in April 1937. After the Washington concert he decided to completely rewrite the finale and revise the first movement. The quartet did not reach its final shape until January 1943 when the Budapest Quartet performed the version we know today at the Library of Congress.

The Quartet in B minor in its final shape is a concise, taut structure whose cohesiveness is the fruit of Barber's long struggle to give it integrity and dramatic strength. The opening movement's energetic statement of its primary theme in unison at the outset evokes the spirit of Beethoven's quartets. A second, chorale-style theme is followed by a more lyrical section, and the development process is continuous throughout the movement. The well-known *Adagio* second movement (heard often on movie sound-tracks) is built on a single melodic idea presented by the first violin, then taken over and treated canonically by the other instruments. A prime example of his lyrical neo-romantic style, it works its way inexorably from the subdued, almost chant-like opening to a climax of great emotional intensity, after which it returns to the medieval Phrygian-mode style of the beginning. The final version of the third movement is built from what were originally the last 52 bars of the first movement. Barber thus creates a rounded A-B-A cyclical form, and, since the final movement follows without pause after the *Adagio*, the quartet could be viewed as a two-movement work.

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