

WHO'S AFRAID OF THE AMERICAN MIDDLEBROW?
SAMUEL BARBER, MODERNIST DISCOURSE, AND THE GREAT DIVIDE

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ABSTRACT

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Although Samuel Barber was one of the most prominent composers of the twentieth century, scholars have yet to contextualize his work within the development of American musical modernism. Throughout Barber's career, critics often derided him for what they felt was a conservative, "neo-Romantic" compositional style. Yet Barber did not fully isolate himself from idioms and techniques associated with modernism. When his contemporaries noticed, however, their reactions were highly polarized. Some applauded his ability to balance Romantic sensibilities with more experimental techniques, while others dismissed his efforts as fraudulent and insufficiently modern.

In this thesis, I explore these disparate reactions to demonstrate how the binary oppositions that dominated twentieth century cultural criticism shaped critical assessments of Barber's work. Building upon the work of scholars like Christopher Chowrimootoo, I argue that examining twentieth century animosity toward the "middlebrow"—a category of cultural production and consumption which mediated between elite modernism and commercial art—illuminates why Barber's contemporaries responded to his musical contributions in the way they did. Viewing the critical reception to Barber's music through a middlebrow framework also allows us to understand how Barber remained true to his own musical voice while navigating the stylistic divides that shaped the twentieth century art music landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

For their *Europakonzert from Berlin* on 1 May 2020, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra altered their concert program to include Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* alongside works by György Ligeti and Arvo Pärt. This change was partly a consequence of COVID-19 health protocols, since legal guidelines in Germany limited the number of performers onstage to fifteen.¹ However, the Berlin Philharmonic also chose this piece because they felt its tragic, sorrowful nature embodied the worry and hardship caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, the Berlin Philharmonic stated that the inclusion of Barber's *Adagio* was an expression of support for his home country, the United States, which was grappling with a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases at the time.²

As Luke Howard demonstrates, the *Adagio*'s association with loss and lament resulted from its use on radio and television following the deaths of prominent American political figures, such as Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy.³ In addition, its use in popular culture—particularly film scenes that depict death or mourning—has further contributed to this connection.⁴ Howard notes, for example, that Barber's *Adagio* is perhaps most often associated with Oliver Stone's 1986 war film *Platoon*.⁵ Furthermore, Howard observes that the *Adagio* "crossed over" from the concert tradition to popular culture before it had the opportunity to "accrue the same degree of classical credentials as older but equally well-known works from the classical repertory."⁶ Consequently, Howard argues that Barber's *Adagio* now occupies "a limbo-like middle ground"—art music purists dismiss the

¹ Anthony Tommasini, "The Berlin Philharmonic Tests a Musical Path Out of Lockdown," *New York Times*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/arts/music/berlin-philharmonic-coronavirus.html>.

² "Europakonzert from the Philharmonie Berlin with Kirill Petrenko," Berliner Philharmoniker Digital Concert Hall, last modified May 1, 2020, <https://www.digitalconcerthall.com/en/concert/53365>.

³ Luke Howard, "The Popular Reception of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*," *American Music* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 53–54. The *Adagio for Strings* has been called America's "national funeral music." See Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 196.

⁴ For more on how Barber's *Adagio for Strings* has been used in popular culture, see Wayne Wentzel, *The Adagio of Samuel Barber* (Missoula: The College Music Society, 2013).

⁵ Howard, "The Popular Reception," 57. Barber's *Adagio* has also been used in films such as *The Elephant Man*, *El Norte*, *Lorenzo's Oil*, *Les Roseaux sauvages*, *Crime of the Century*, *Amélie*, and *SlmOne*. See Howard, "The Popular Reception," 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

piece as “too popular” to be taken seriously, while commercial audiences often enthusiastically identify it as their favorite “classical” work.⁷

Samuel Barber occupied a similarly liminal position within the twentieth century American art music landscape. The “art music purists” in this case were modernist critics and composers, who frequently dismissed the “neo-Romantic” aspects of Barber’s compositional style by implying that his musical contributions were regressive and pandering.⁸ Nonetheless, Barber enjoyed support and wide acclaim from influential cultural institutions during his lifetime: he received commissions from Lincoln Center and the Metropolitan Opera, for example, as well as two Pulitzer Prizes. In addition, along with his contemporary, Aaron Copland, Barber was one of the most frequently performed American composers from 1941 until the mid-1960s.⁹

The negative critical responses to Barber’s music largely stemmed from a disapproval toward the seemingly “conservative” nature of his compositional style. For example, although Copland acknowledged Barber composed music that “in its quiet moods was very touching and very well done,” he tempered this praise by noting that Barber wrote in a style reminiscent of a bygone era, which alienated Barber from the steady progression of American art music.¹⁰ As Copland wrote in his 1968 book *New Music 1900–1960*, “Nothing really new was possible in music until a reaction had set in against [the Romantic] tradition. The entire history of modern music, therefore, may be said to be a history of the gradual pull-away from the Germanic musical tradition of the past century.”¹¹ Barber’s music, with its persistent ties to German Romanticism, seemed incompatible with this project. Furthermore, in a 1981 interview with Peter Dickinson, Copland asserted: “... I thought of

⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸ My understanding of “neo-Romanticism” is drawn from Jann Pasler, who describes neo-Romanticism as “the return to emotional expression associated with 19th-century Romanticism.” See Pasler, “Neo-Romantic,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, accessed October 6, 2020.

⁹ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 555.

¹⁰ Peter Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 95.

¹¹ Aaron Copland, *New Music 1900–1960* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1968), 17.

Sam as not so interested in the latest thing but always writing his music from an inner need that did not take a revolutionary turn at all. It was what a composer perhaps of fifty years ago might have felt. I don't think he was at all interested in writing rhythms that nobody else had dreamt up ... He seemed almost too safe."¹² This criticism was a consistent theme in modernist assessments of Barber's music.

Yet Barber did not entirely isolate himself from experimental musical trends: he utilized twelve-tone writing in multiple compositions, for example, such as the Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 26, and the *Prayers of Kierkegaard* cantata.¹³ Barber's use of "modern" idioms and techniques, however, was met with polarized and contradictory reactions from his contemporaries. Some applauded Barber's ability to balance his Romantic sensibilities with more experimental techniques. In 1950, for instance, the Russian American pianist Vladimir Horowitz praised this aspect of Barber's Piano Sonata: "It is romantic, subjective, and written in the modern idiom. The first movement is difficult to understand perhaps. But Barber has put warmth and a heart into the work that the ultra-modern composers, with their mechanical pyrotechnics, lack."¹⁴ Others responded to his utilization of disparate stylistic techniques with ambivalence or unease. In his 1944 review of Barber's Second Symphony, for example, Virgil Thomson argued that Barber's use of dissonant harmonies failed to disguise the regressive nature of his compositional style:

If his First [Symphony] ... represents, as I think it does, a Hamlet-like backward yearning toward the womb of German Romanticism, [the Second Symphony] may well be Hamlet in modern dress. I've a suspicion they are really the same piece. The new one is modernistic on the surface; at least an effort has been made to write in the dissonant style. But the melodic material would have been set off just as well, and

¹² Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 95.

¹³ Barber's Piano Sonata in particular has led to more analytical writings than any of Barber's other works. See Douglas Heist, "Harmonic Organization and Sonata Form: The First Movement of Samuel Barber's Sonata, Opus 26," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 27 (1990): 25–31; Emily Lu, "The Piano Concerto of Samuel Barber," (DMA diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1986); Christopher Keyes, "Set-Classes, 12-Tone Rows, and Tonality in the Third Movement of Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata: The Non-Duality of Tonality and Atonality," *20th-Century Music* 5 (1998): 9–15.

¹⁴ *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, January 7, 1950. Quoted in Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 340.

probably better, by a less angular harmonic texture. Also, Mr. Barber does not handle dissonant counterpoint with much freedom.¹⁵

The polarized and contradictory nature of these reactions to Barber's music reflect what Andreas Huyssen theorized as "the Great Divide," namely a type of "discourse which insists on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture."¹⁶ In this thesis, I demonstrate how the binary oppositions that dominated twentieth century academic discourse and cultural criticism—such as innovation versus tradition, difficulty versus accessibility, reason versus emotion—shaped the critical reception to Barber's music during his lifetime. My thesis, therefore, joins a growing body of literature that seeks to challenge the prioritization of modernism within American art music historiography while remaining sensitive to its impact on twentieth century artistic developments.¹⁷

In Chapter One, I analyze the dissonance between Barber's enduring presence on concert programs and his influence—or lack thereof—in academia and cultural criticism. I argue that this disconnect indicates a difference between artistic values held by performers and those which have historically preoccupied academics and critics. Barber's ability to write idiomatically and emotionally ensured that his music would not fade into obscurity, even as those aspects of his compositional style were deemed regressive or old fashioned by critics. In Chapter Two, I examine Anglophone journalistic criticism to determine how Barber's contemporaries responded to his *Adagio for Strings*, Op. 11 (1936) and Piano Concerto, Op. 38 (1960). I argue that the critical discourse surrounding

¹⁵ Virgil Thomson, "More Barber," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 10, 1944.

¹⁶ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), viii.

¹⁷ This includes, for example, Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Christopher Chowrimootoo, "'Britten Minor': Constructing the Modernist Canon," *Twentieth Century Music* 13, no. 2 (2016): 261–290; Christopher Chowrimootoo, "Reviving the Middlebrow, or: Deconstructing Modernism from the Inside," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 139, no. 1 (2014): 187–197; Björn Heile, "Darmstadt as Other: British and American Responses to Musical Modernism," *Twentieth Century* 1, no. 2 (2004): 161–178; Susan McClary, "Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition." In *Reading Music: Selected Essays* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 57–81.

these works demonstrates a tension between artistic progress and tradition, a dichotomy that continues to inform contemporary engagement with Barber's music.

Finally, in Chapter Three I argue that the binary oppositions which shape the critical approaches to Barber's music do not accurately capture his compositional style or his position in twentieth century music history. Viewing Barber as simply an American neo-Romantic—or emphasizing his use of experimental compositional techniques to establish him as an innovative “modernist” after all—subscribes to what Peter Franklin calls a “mythic picture” in which modernists were cast in opposition to a “reactionary” collection of populists and traditionalists.¹⁸ Building on the work of scholars such as Christopher Chowrimootoo, I argue that the cultural category of “middlebrow” offers a productive middle path for understanding how Barber's musical contributions were understood and valued, both by his contemporaries and by audiences and critics today. Furthermore, viewing Barber's work through a middlebrow framework allows us to better understand how Barber remained true to his own musical voice while navigating stylistic divides.

¹⁸ Peter Franklin, *The Idea of Music: Schoenberg and Others* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1985), xiii. The revisionist impulse to “redeem” so-called conservative or populist composers as modernists can be found in scholarship such as J.P.E Harper-Scott, *Edward Elgar, Modernist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

CHAPTER 1

DEVELOPING THE “INNER VOICE”: A (RE)CONTEXTUALIZATION OF SAMUEL BARBER’S COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

The universal style, after World War II, is the eclecticism of the shattered.¹⁹

Introduction

In his essay “Resisting the Rite,” Richard Taruskin considers how and why Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* achieved its exalted status among academics and performers alike.²⁰ Taruskin observes that this composition occupied a prominent position in both the academic canon and the concert repertoire by the early 1950s, a rare feat. Few composers, much less individual compositions, have managed this achievement. As Taruskin notes, when modernist compositions “cross over” and join the standard performance repertoire, they often lose their place in the academic canon.²¹ This paradox perturbed figures like H.A. Scott, who was an admirer of Edward Elgar’s music.²² In his response to a 1928 *Radio Times* article encouraging British audiences to reevaluate their dislike of experimental music trends, for example, Scott wrote: “[Schoenberg and Stravinsky are] regarded as composer[s] of the first importance, but the actual compositions of both are found so unpalatable, not merely by the vulgar herd, but by the musical public in general, that it is the rarest of occurrences for any of them to be played!”²³

If modernist composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky enjoy a status within academia that is disproportionate to their appearance on concert programs, Samuel Barber suffers from the

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, *The Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 10.

²⁰ Richard Taruskin, “Resisting the Rite,” in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad: New Essays* (Oakland: University of California, 2016), 395–427.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 401.

²² Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922–1936: Shaping a Nation’s Taste* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 429.

²³ H.A. Scott, “This Modern Music! Product of an Age of Stunts,” *Radio Times*, September 28, 1928. Scott was responding to an article by Edwin Evans: see “Points of View: Is Modern Music Inferior?” *Radio Times*, August 31, 1928.

opposite situation: a Barber composition is more likely to be heard in a performance setting than discussed in a classroom.²⁴ I argue that this dissonance stems from a disconnect in the artistic values motivating Barber and those which have historically preoccupied American art music historiography, namely—as Christopher Chowrimootoo describes—a commitment to “musical pleasure and communication with a new mass audience rather than modernist values like uncompromising originality and radical autonomy.”²⁵ In addition, modernist values shaped how Barber’s compositions were assessed by twentieth century cultural critics, even those who approved of his musical contributions.

In this chapter, I will first outline the biographical elements that influenced Barber’s compositional development, particularly those which shaped his dedication to a “vocally inspired lyricism,” idiosyncratic writing, and anti-elitism.²⁶ I will then demonstrate how the critical reception to his Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 14, focused on these values, as well as why the performers Barber collaborated with believed his music would continue to resonate with audiences. Finally, I analyze how the so-called “Frankfurt School paradigm” shaped the critical reception to Barber’s music during the 1950s and 1960s by contextualizing his music within the rise of serialism in the United States.²⁷

Compositional Influences

In her seminal biographical study, Barbara Heyman identifies three key influences on Barber’s compositional style: his formal education at Curtis Institute of Music, his experiences in

²⁴ Wayne Wentzel opens his research guide, for example, by acknowledging that “serious studies on Samuel Barber and his music are not numerous.” Interest in Barber’s compositional output, however, is rising among university students, who are programming his music and writing theses or dissertations on specific pieces. See Wentzel, *Samuel Barber: A Guide to Research* (New York: Routledge Music Bibliographies, 2001), 1.

²⁵ Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten’s Operas and the Great Divide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 3.

²⁶ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 1.

²⁷ Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century: The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), xviii.

Europe, and his relationship with Gian Carlo Menotti and Sidney and Louise Homer.²⁸ Examining these influences is crucial for two reasons: first, understanding the material forces that shaped Barber's musical development allows us to understand why he seldom gravitated toward experimental compositional trends. Second, certain influences—such as his socioeconomic standing and his professional or personal connections—were often mentioned by the modernist critics and composers who assessed his work.

Barber entered the Curtis Institute of Music in 1924 and began three areas of study—piano, voice, and composition.²⁹ He studied composition with Rosario Scalero, who emphasized training in counterpoint as well as a deep understanding of all musical forms and genres, a pedagogical approach described by Heyman as both “rigorous” and “traditional.”³⁰ The American composer Constant Vaclain, for example, attested to the demanding and disciplined nature of Scalero's methods, describing his unique approach to teaching counterpoint as follows:

It was supposed to be done without touching piano so that we developed the ability to objectify the many voices in our heads without having to have an instrument to try things out. The only other composers in the twentieth century who had a course of study like this were other Scalero pupils and people like Bartók, who studied the same way in Budapest, and Hindemith. It produces a kind of technique which is recognizable ... a kind of mastery over the way voices should be put together.³¹

Heyman notes that this approach clearly impacted Barber's compositional development, for the composers and critics who assessed his work consistently praised his compositions for their

²⁸ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 1. In her list of major influences on the development of Barber's compositional style, Heyman does not include Gian Carlo Menotti or Louise Homer. I have included Menotti because, as this chapter hopes to demonstrate, Barber's romantic relationship with Menotti is intertwined with his musical and intellectual growth. In addition, Barber's exposure to his aunt's accomplishments as a singer shaped his vocal-oriented approach.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 34. Constant Vaclain was also Barber's second cousin. He studied with Scalero for six years, and then taught at Curtis Institute of Music 1939–1953. See Gayle Ronan Sims, “Andre C. Vaclain, 95, composer,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 19, 2003.

“remarkable sense of form and well-crafted design.”³² Yet as Taruskin outlines during the Romantic era an artist was “no longer an especially skilled craftsman but an especially endowed spirit (i.e., a genius), [who] is by that gift or curse estranged from the rest of mankind, cast into a vanguard that inspires both awe and resentment from the mass of ordinary men, who are made to feel and acknowledge their ordinariness in his presence.”³³ From this perspective, a critical focus on the construction and craftsmanship of Barber’s music can be regarded as a tacit slight that relegates Barber to a sub-genius status.³⁴

Barber’s education at the Curtis Institute of Music also provided him with access to the financial support and professional connections that assisted in his later success.³⁵ His personal and professional relationship with Mary Curtis Bok was particularly impactful. Bok founded Curtis in 1924 and demonstrated a lifelong commitment to furthering the careers of its students. She made numerous philanthropic contributions to the institute, for example, and utilized her formidable social network of prominent music patrons to generate opportunities for Curtis students to perform at major cultural institutions.³⁶ Barber was also a direct recipient of Bok’s generosity: she financed several of his trips to Europe he could continue studying with Scalero in the summer, for instance, and introduced him to several important music patrons, such as Edith Braun and Elizabeth Coolidge.³⁷

³² Ibid., 35. For example, in his 1926 article “America’s Young Men of Promise,” Aaron Copland wrote: “If it is careful workmanship that is desired, turn to the music of ... Samuel Barber.” See Aaron Copland, “The Younger Generation of American Composers: 1926–59,” in *Aaron Copland: A Reader*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz and Steve Silverstein (New York: Routledge, 2004), 182. The American pianist John Browning also noted Barber’s skill at writing counterpoint: “I think one thing that stands out is the absolutely superb mastery of counterpoint. Really, Sam was a contrapuntal composer. When one looks at the fugue of the [Piano Sonata], I do not know of another piano fugue as successful since the Brahms *Handel Variations* or as well written. See Peter Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 97.

³³ Taruskin, “Resisting the Rite,” 401.

³⁴ See also Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 203–242.

³⁵ John Browning, for instance, noted that Barber’s financial security meant he was not forced to “crank out works to make ends meet.” See Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 139.

³⁶ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 34. The Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, for example, commissioned *Hermit Songs*. See Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 374. For more on the role of female music patrons during the 1920s, see Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 201–227.

³⁷ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 114, 125.

Bok also introduced Barber to the head of G. Schirmer, the firm that became Barber's exclusive publisher. Copland would later describe this occurrence as uncommonly fortuitous, one that was seldom experienced by Barber's more experimental contemporaries: "That was lucky, course. I wasn't so lucky, because the big-shot publishers wouldn't touch me. I was a far-out modernist; the music was difficult to play, rhythms difficult to reproduce. I was thought to be a financial bust ... Sam never had those problems. Schirmer's wouldn't touch the rest of us!"³⁸ In other words, Copland maintained that because Barber's compositional style appealed to audiences, his music was ultimately more financially lucrative compared to pieces by experimental modernists. The marketability of Barber's music undoubtably contributed to his success, therefore, but it was, as well will see, also a point of contention for modernist composers and critics.

Barber's travels and studies in Europe was a second important influence on his artistic growth. Barber began traveling to Europe in 1928, where he spent summers studying with Scalero or working on various commissions. As Heyman suggests, Barber's affinity for European culture may have been a consequence of the region in which he grew up: Barber was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, a town characterized by moral and cultural conservatism.³⁹ Although the literary arts were celebrated, music and theatre were regarded with suspicion. Barber's cousin Ann Homer, for example, recalled that West Chester considered music to be an odd diversion: "There was a certain attitude toward music, a belittlement, as though it had no place in the scheme of things."⁴⁰ Barber does appear to have retained a fondness for his Pennsylvania home: his partner Gian Carlo Menotti, for instance, maintained that "[Barber] had a great *sehnsucht* for his childhood in West Chester. In that way he was very American."⁴¹ Nonetheless, leaving the social and intellectual provincialism of

³⁸ Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 97.

³⁹ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5. Ann Homer was the daughter of Sidney and Louise Homer.

⁴¹ Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 65.

West Chester behind appears to have been freeing for Barber, particularly during the early stages of his compositional career.⁴²

In addition, rather than gravitating toward Paris—the center of modernist composition during the early twentieth century—Barber was instead drawn to Italy, where he mingled with artists and intellectuals whose interests mirrored his own aesthetic sensibilities.⁴³ Barber also spent two years in Italy as a composition fellow at the American Academy in Rome after winning the Rome Prize in 1935. This situated Barber outside the group of American composers who studied at the Fontainebleau with Nadia Boulanger. Indeed, as Jeffrey Wright notes, “The image of Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson traveling to France in the early twentieth century to study under the legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger is the prevalent historical picture of American-European musical interaction.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, Barber’s affinity for Italy was also shaped by his romantic relationship with Gian Carlo Menotti. Barber’s letters to his family in 1929, for example, reveal how his relationship with Menotti deepened during his time there: “I suppose you can tell from the sincerity of my letters how much more Europe means to me this year. Every moment is a joy. Perhaps it is because one must go time to really enjoy the second. Or perhaps it is Gian Carlo. He is quite perfect; at close range, the defects become delights.”⁴⁵

Perhaps the most significant influence on Barber’s musical development, however, was the guidance and support he received from his uncle Sidney Homer as well as his aunt, Louise Homer. A composer himself, Homer began mentoring Barber in 1922 after Barber showed him his first

⁴² Barber made his first trip to Europe in 1928 and his personal correspondence reveal his exhilaration and delight at the experience: “I sit on the forward bow of the boat looking toward Europe—as far as possible from West Chester as it is in my power to be! ... Our whole life is so unreal and so drenched by fantasy that I move around unthinking.” See Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 58.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Wright, “Americans in Rome: Music by Fellows of the American Academy in Rome. Donald Berman, Artistic Director. Bridge Records 9271, 2008,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 3, no. 4 (2009): 514. See also Martin Brody, ed. *Music and Musical Composition at the American Academy in Rome* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014).

⁴⁵ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 76. See also John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1978).

compositions.⁴⁶ Barber's parents were initially ambivalent toward his interest in music, and thus it was solely a result of Homer's encouragement that they allowed Barber to attend Curtis in 1924.⁴⁷ From the time he was a student, Barber wrote to Homer about his compositions and educational progress. Their letters also reveal the artistic principles that Homer sought to impart to his nephew. Most importantly, Homer cautioned Barber against participating in current musical trends simply for appearances and encouraged him to instead focus on cultivating a sincere "inner voice."⁴⁸ In 1924, for instance, Homer wrote:

If you think of music from the point of view of sensationalism and publicity, your work will show it. If you learn to love the poetic under-current and the subtleties of beauty and spirituality which have been expressed in music, your work will show as much. The wonderful thing about art is that a man can conceal nothing; it reveals him as naked and unadorned ... Sincerity and beauty seem to stand the test, but love for mankind and a willingness to serve humbly seem to fill the world with joy.⁴⁹

Homer's critical attitude toward "sensationalism and publicity" can be interpreted as a response to the so-called "ultra-modernists" of the 1920s, who were invested in experimenting with new technological materials and new ways of organizing sound. Those who objected to such experiments often dismissed them as novelties or stunts designed to generate public exposure or notoriety. Homer's commitment to artistic sincerity and anti-elitism was echoed by Barber in a 1935 interview following the premiere of his tone poem, *Music for a Scene from Shelley*: "My aim is to write good music that will be comprehensible to as many people, instead of music heard only by small, snobbish musical societies in large cities."⁵⁰ It is important to note that Barber is expressing an anti-modernist position, for he outlines his dedication to emotional resonance and accessibility rather than an esoteric complexity and elitism.

⁴⁶ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 38–39.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 146.

Interestingly, despite their differing compositional approaches Barber's desire to write music that was "comprehensible to as many people as possible" paralleled Copland's own preoccupations with accessibility.⁵¹ As Elizabeth Crist outlines, by 1933 Copland was arguing that contemporary music should "no longer be confined to the sphere of special society."⁵² To better compose for a mass audience, Copland began writing music in a style that he described as "imposed simplicity."⁵³ Unlike Barber, however, Copland's simplified style was intertwined with radical political agenda. As Crist notes, "It has long been recognized that Copland's accessible manner was, in some measure, a response to the social and cultural turmoil of the Great Depression and World War II."⁵⁴ Barber's commitment to comprehensibility, on the other hand, was not rooted in sociocultural concerns. The accessibility of his compositional style was instead a result of his dedication to emotional directness and idiosyncratic writing.

Finally, Sidney Homer's wife, the singer Louise Homer, was also a meaningful influence on Barber. Louise Homer studied voice and dramatic acting in Paris and became a leading contralto with the Metropolitan Opera.⁵⁵ Barber recalled that from childhood he heard her sing Sidney Homer's songs alongside works by more easily recognizable European composers: "She did not give them a place only at the end of her programs, which is the common destiny of most American songs, brought up at the rear like after dinner mints, for an audience whose best attention has already been given elsewhere."⁵⁶ In addition, Barber described his aunt's voice as "sound[ing] like no other ...the rich low voice combined with brilliant high notes that Verdi would have liked and is so

⁵¹ Ibid., 146.

⁵² Aaron Copland, "The Composer in America, 1923–33," *Modern Music* 5, no. 3 (1933): 91. Quoted in Elizabeth Bergman Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 410.

⁵³ Crist, "Aaron Copland and the Popular Front," 410.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 412

⁵⁵ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15.

rare today.”⁵⁷ Hearing his aunt sing from an early age, in combination with his own vocal training, appears to have contributed to the “vocally inspired lyricism” that was intrinsic to his compositional style.⁵⁸

The Violin Concerto as Paradigmatic Barber

Barber’s Violin Concerto exemplifies the musical qualities appreciated by performers and orchestral audiences is Barber’s Op. 14 Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. As Heyman notes, although this work may not be the first choice for a violinist hoping to demonstrate the technical fireworks and virtuosic possibilities of the instrument, it nonetheless remains well-established in the violin repertory and continues to be programmed by major orchestral institutions.⁵⁹ The idiosyncratic writing and singing melodies that have contributed to its present position in the performance repertory were also praised during the twentieth century.

Barber’s Op. 14 Violin Concerto was premiered by Albert Spaulding on 7 February 1941 at the American Academy of Music in Philadelphia.⁶⁰ Several local newspapers recounted the audience’s positive reaction: in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, for example, Linton Martin recalled the “storm of applause showered on both soloist and composer,” concluding that the concerto could be considered an “exceptional popular success.”⁶¹ The same review also lauded Barber’s ability to compose a concerto “refreshingly free from arbitrary tricks and musical mannerisms, one in which straight-forwardness and sincerity are among its most engaging qualities.”⁶² *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes concurred: following a 1944 performance of the concerto Downes praised the work as “the work of a young American composer who has something to say, and says it honestly

⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 227.

⁶⁰ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 224.

⁶¹ Linton Martin, “Albert Spaulding is Soloist with Orchestra at Academy,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 8, 1941.

⁶² Ibid., 12.

and without egotism, and therefore produces some genuine and interesting music.”⁶³ For modernist critics, however, Barber’s perceived “sincerity” and “honesty” was not necessarily a compliment, as these values suggested a compromised compositional style. Virgil Thomson, for example, maintained that although the Violin Concerto “cannot fail to charm by its gracious lyrical plenitude and its complete absence of tawdry swank,” one was only able to excuse such “elementary musical methods” because “[Barber’s] heart is pure.”⁶⁴ In other words, Barber’s compositional style was not critiqued with more forceful terms because his decision to compose in a conservative or regressive manner was not motivated by prestige or ego.

Critics outside the United States also emphasized Barber’s understanding of the violin’s lyrical capabilities. Following a 1944 performance in London at Albert Hall, for example, music critic F. Bonavia stated that

Barber appears to have solved with unusual success most of the problems that confront the writer of violin music. The general tendency today is to make the violin sound as much unlike a violin as possible ... the violin, however, remains essentially a lyrical instrument, and it was Barber’s realization of this fact that surprised and delighted the London public.⁶⁵

Bonavia’s praise for Barber’s idiosyncratic approach is notable because Barber himself asserted that his collaborative relationships with performers were more significant to him than his associations with other composers. In a 1971 interview with John Gruen, for example, Barber stated: “I’m not an analyzer, and I don’t surround myself with other composers ... It seems to me that the most practical thing is simply to write your music in the way you want to write it. Then you go out and find the interpreters who will give it voice. The point is, composers have never helped me. Performers have *always* helped me.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Olin Downes, “Totenberg Plays Barber Concerto,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1944.

⁶⁴ Virgil Thomson, “Academicism with Charm,” *New York Herald Tribune*, February 12, 1941.

⁶⁵ F. Bonavia, “Barber’s Concerto in London,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1944.

⁶⁶ John Gruen, “And Where Has Samuel Barber Been...?” *New York Times*, October 3, 1971.

Performers and Collaborators

One such performer was Leontyne Price, who first met Barber in 1953 through her voice teacher at the Juilliard School and would go on to premiere the composer's 1953 song cycle *Hermit Songs*.⁶⁷ In a 1981 interview, Price recalled Barber's adeptness at writing for voice, stating, "almost instantly, there was this affinity for Barber's music the way it sort of embraces my instrument, as does Verdi and some Mozart and Strauss. It's the same sort of thing."⁶⁸ Price also identified the two factors in particular that she believed contributed to the longevity and wide appeal of Barber's music. The first was his ability to mediate between emotional directness and formal complexity:

[Barber] was very successful. That's because he wrote from feelings. At the same time, he had an extraordinary mind, and he did not write to show off to his colleagues or his peers. He wrote out of emotion, which I think makes a great artist. It was not antiseptic. Orchestras love to play his music because it is mentally challenging, you're never bored ... It's that quality that makes his music popular. It falls intellectually to the mind and beautifully on the ear, which is a rare combination.⁶⁹

Price also believed that Barber's compositions retained their popularity because they transcended provincial or nationalist concerns. For example, when Dickinson asked Price if any of Barber's compositions were decidedly "American" she mused: "[Barber] is one of the greatest composers of our time. And being American is, of course, wonderful, but it's more international ... I think his music has an outreach that is not totally American."⁷⁰ Describing Barber's music as "international" separated him from the Americanist project of the 1930s and 1940s, a project which Copland described as seeking to capture "in musical terms the deepest and most significant aspects of American life."⁷¹ Menotti also maintained that Barber's contributions transcended the "American" label: "... people have to realize that [Barber] has left not only to American music but to the music

⁶⁷ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 376. Leontyne Price studied with Florence Kimball at the Juilliard School.

⁶⁸ Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 124.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷¹ Aaron Copland, "US Books and Music: A Vital and Varied Music," no date, LoC-AC, 230/3. Quoted in Emily Abrams Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 9 and Marta Robertson and Robin Armstrong, *Aaron Copland: A Guide to Research* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 128.

of the century some works that are here to stay—for example, the Piano Sonata. I don't know a single piano sonata in the modern repertoire that has that strength."⁷²

The pianist John Browning also worked closely with Barber and shared several of Price's opinions of Barber's music. Browning and Barber first met when Browning made his New York Philharmonic debut in 1956. Since the orchestra was premiering one of his compositions at the same concert, Barber attended all the rehearsals and heard Browning perform Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini*. Barber had long admired the Russian style of pianism, which valued technical proficiency as well as a long, singing tone.⁷³ This method likely resonated with Barber due to the lyrical nature of his own compositional approach. Browning was highly trained in this style, having studied with the Russian pianist Rosina Lhévinne at the Juilliard School.⁷⁴ Additionally, a review of Browning's debut with the New York Philharmonic praised his ability to "play a romantic melody with good taste, innate musicality and a nice feeling for a songful line."⁷⁵ It is this quality in particular that may have contributed to Barber's high regard for Browning's musical skill.

When Barber wrote for specific performers, he often met them for long rehearsals in which the performer in question would play through his or her entire repertoire. This process allowed Barber to develop a comprehensive understanding of the performer's individual technical or musical strengths and tailor the composition accordingly. Browning was no exception; in 1981 he recounted:

Sam had a very interesting way of writing for artists. He would have any of us for whom he was writing a work come up to the country house at Mt. Kisco and play through everything we knew for three, four, or five hours. Mr. Horowitz did it, Miss Price did it, I did it. And he would get a feel of what he thought our strong points were ... Sam was always wonderful in that way; he always listened to the performer.⁷⁶

⁷² Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 61.

⁷³ Blanc Chun Pong Wan, "Contemporary Russian Piano School: Pedagogy and Performance" (PhD diss., King's College London, 2016), 86; Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 452. See also Christopher Barnes, trans., *The Russian Piano School: Russian Pianists and Moscow Conservatoire Professors on the Art of the Piano* (London: Kahn & Averill, 2007); Josef Lhévinne, *Basic Principles in Pianoforte Playing* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972).

⁷⁴ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 452.

⁷⁵ "Concerts: Pianist Bows," *New York Times*, February 6, 1956.

⁷⁶ Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 133.

Browning maintained Barber's success also stemmed from his awareness of the audience when he composed: "[Barber] wrote for the public. He was very conscious of public reaction ... I think, perhaps like a good performer, a good composer wants a work to succeed."⁷⁷ Browning contrasted this approach with that of avant-garde composers, who did not write with the public in mind. He cited John Cage in particular, describing him as an "ivory tower" composer.⁷⁸ Consequently, Barber's sensitivity to his audience was not considered to be an asset by modernist composers, which shaped their assessments of his work.

Barber's "vocally inspired lyricism," depth of feeling, and idiosyncratic writing continues to resonate with performers in the twenty-first century.⁷⁹ When the American cellist Alisa Weilerstein, for example, appeared in a publicity video prior to her 2012 performance of Barber's Cello Concerto with the New York Philharmonic, she invoked these very qualities in her praise of the work: "[Barber's Cello Concerto] has everything you could want. It's a very emotional piece. It also has a lot of fireworks, and an aching lyricism. This piece is ... a little grittier in character, a little angrier let's say, but it has incredible lyricism. It's full of melodies ... the writing for the cello is so fantastic."⁸⁰ And yet, it is these features that composers and critics sympathetic to musical modernism found to be most suspect. To properly understand Barber's reception in this context, a brief overview of American serialism is needed.

Barber and the Rise of American Serialism

In the late 1920s, a group of American ultra-modern composers began utilizing twelve-tone compositional techniques.⁸¹ These efforts were bolstered in the 1930s when a group of European

⁷⁷ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁹ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 1.

⁸⁰ "Alisa Weilerstein on Barber's Cello Concerto," YouTube, New York Philharmonic, last modified February 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGdURicfEVI>.

⁸¹ Joseph N. Straus, *Twelve-Tone Music in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xvii.

twelve-tone composers—such as Stefan Wolpe, Hanns Eisler, and Arnold Schoenberg—arrived in the United States to escape the rise of Nazism and the impending war. The combined presence of American ultramodern composers and newly arrived European émigrés set the stage for an increased preoccupation with twelve-tone compositional techniques following the Second World War.⁸² In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s twelve-tone music became a prominent force in the American contemporary music scene and culminated in its institutionalization in academia, a development Milton Babbitt advocated for in his infamous 1958 essay “Who Cares if You Listen?”⁸³ Babbitt argued that “the most advanced music composition” deserved to be recognized as a form of legitimate scholarly research.⁸⁴

Recent revisionist scholarship, however, has challenged the supposed dominance of twelve-tone music in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Joseph Straus, for example, argued that the history of twelve-tone composition has been “badly mischaracterized in the journalistic and scholarly literature,” which is prone to overstatement and hyperbole.⁸⁵ Straus employed statistical analysis to demonstrate that twelve-tone composers did not monopolize the American art music scene: on the contrary, Straus asserts that the “jobs, grants, awards, publications, performances recordings, and reviews went to twelve-tone composers roughly in proportion to their numbers within the larger population of composers,” which, for Straus, discredits the idea of a “serial tyranny.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, Straus maintains that the 1950s and 1960s lacked contemporaneous accounts of serialism’s disproportionate influence, leading him to conclude that the myth of a serial tyranny was concocted by tonal composers.⁸⁷

⁸² Ibid., xvii.

⁸³ Ibid., xvii.

⁸⁴ Milton Babbitt, “Who Cares if You Listen?” *High Fidelity Magazine* 8, no. 2 (1958): 38–40, 126–127; Richard Taruskin, “Afterword: Nicht blutbefleckt?” *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 275.

⁸⁵ Straus, *Twelve-Tone Music in America*, 194.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 199. See also Emily Abrams Ansari, “Musical Americanism, Cold War Consensus, and the U.S.–USSR Composers’ Exchange, 1958–60,” *The Musical Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 360–389.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 200.

An empirical analysis of this type does not provide the full picture. As Anne Shreffler has argued, it cannot answer how and why “the revival (and later institutionalization) of pre-war modernism and the rising acceptance of scientific language, methods, and metaphors for thinking about and creating art” took hold post-1945.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Shreffler notes that statistical studies cannot account for audience reception, cultural prestige, or the intersection between musical style and political ideology.⁸⁹ Only a small number of composers may have dedicated themselves to serial composition, but the figures who were utilizing such techniques included the most influential and respected composers on the American music scene. In addition, most young composers were being taught almost exclusively serial techniques within academic institutions.⁹⁰ Consequently, serialism was “accompanied by certain real pressures ... The rightness of the path was supported by the political, ideological, and cultural status of this music, which functioned independently of the beliefs of any individual composer.”⁹¹ To claim that all twentieth-century musical styles were equally valid or prestigious is misleading, for such assertions overlook the social pressures and cultural hierarchies that shaped the twentieth century musical climate.⁹²

In his book *Pieces of Tradition: An Analysis of Contemporary Tonal Music*, Daniel Harrison argues that tonal harmonic languages became increasingly broad during the twentieth century and were less homogenous than one might think.⁹³ However, most twentieth-century composers and cultural critics portrayed tonality and serialism as oppositional. As we shall see, these divides—such as those

⁸⁸ Anne C. Shreffler, “The Myth of Empirical Historiography: A Response to Joseph N. Straus,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 84, no. 1 (2000): 31. Note that Shreffler was responding to Straus’s 2000 article “The Myth of ‘Serial Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s,” which was later incorporated into his 2009 book *Twelve Tone Music in America*. See Joseph Straus, “The Myth of ‘Serial Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The Musical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (1999): 301–343.

⁸⁹ Shreffler, “The Myth of Empirical Historiography,” 32.

⁹⁰ Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower*, 5.

⁹¹ Shreffler, “The Myth of Empirical Historiography,” 36.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹³ Daniel Harrison, *Pieces of Tradition: An Analysis of Contemporary Tonal Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

between tonal and serial, experimental and traditional, complex and accessible—influenced how Barber's musical contributions were assessed during his lifetime.

CHAPTER 2

NAVIGATING CULTURAL CATEGORIES: SAMUEL BARBER, MUSICAL AMERICANISM, AND LYRICISM AS “FEMININE”

I do not think there is any such thing as mechanized musical composition without feeling, without emotion. Music is one of the arts which appeals directly through the emotions. Mechanism and feeling will have to go hand in hand, in the same way that a skyscraper is at the same time a triumph of the machine and a tremendous emotional experience, almost breathtaking.⁹⁴

—George Gershwin

Introduction

In October 1935, Barber began the two years of study at the American Academy afforded him by the Rome Prize.⁹⁵ Barber spent his days composing in a small yellow house a short distance from the academy, where he worked on his first symphony as well as several new songs.⁹⁶ During his residency, Felix Lamond encouraged him to consider writing a string quartet, a suggestion Barber took more seriously upon learning in 1936 that the Curtis Quartet was planning a European concert tour.⁹⁷ As a result, Barber began working on what would become the Op. 11 String Quartet in hopes that the ensemble would be invited to premiere the work in Rome if completed in time.⁹⁸

Barber made slow progress on the quartet, however. Writing to Rosario Scalero in August 1936 he lamented, “I have just started a string quartet: but how difficult it is! It seems to me that because we have so assiduously forced our personalities on Music—on Music, who never asked for them! —we have lost elegance; and if we cannot recapture elegance, the quartet-form has escaped us

⁹⁴ George Gershwin, “The Composer and the Machine Age,” in *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. Daniel Albright. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004: 387.

⁹⁵ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 168.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 153. Barber composed nine songs in total during his American Academy residency, setting three texts by W.H. Davies and six poems by James Joyce.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 169. Felix Lamond directed the Department of Musical Composition at the American Academy in Rome 1920–1940. He was also in charge of arranging concerts at the American Academy. See Andrea Olmstead “American Academy in Rome,” *Grove Music Online*, February 6, 2021.

⁹⁸ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 169.

forever. It is a struggle.”⁹⁹ Consequently, the Curtis Quartet was unable to perform the work on their tour but eventually premiered the first and second movements on 7 March 1937 at the Curtis Institute of Music.¹⁰⁰

Some critics expressed skepticism toward the work. A writer with the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* described the quartet as “unduly pretentious,” for example, adding that “In the opening allegro, Mr. Barber seemed to be seeking effects better suited for orchestral expression. The slow movement succeeded in evoking a mood, but suffered from repetitiousness.”¹⁰¹ The quartet received more positive reviews in Europe, however, particularly in England. Following a November 1937 performance in London, for instance, *The Times* reported: “It has a fine slow movement, a meditation that unfolds itself in spirals. Most composers find it easier to write quick movements than slow, but Mr. Barber achieved greater success with the more difficult task.”¹⁰²

The *Times*’s assessment of the quartet’s slow movement proved prophetic, for Barber’s string orchestra arrangement of the movement—now known as the *Adagio for Strings*—would become Barber’s most popular composition, as well as one of the most famous elegiac works from the twentieth century. Since the *Adagio* is so well-known, the piece has already received much attention from music scholars. Matthew BaileyShea, for instance, approaches the entire Op. 11 String Quartet from an analytical standpoint, using the concept of “mimetic engagement” to examine how the second movement functions as “a crucial component within a larger, multi-movement tragic narrative.”¹⁰³ The *Adagio* has even been the subject of reception studies, a rare approach within existing Barber scholarship. Wayne Wentzel, for example, has compiled an anthology that catalogues

⁹⁹ Ibid., 172.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 173. The first performance of the complete quartet in the United States took place on 20 April 1937 at the Library of Congress.

¹⁰¹ “Program of Music by Samuel Barber Given at Casimir Hall,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, March 8, 1937.

¹⁰² “Weekend Concerts,” *The Times*, November 8, 1937.

¹⁰³ Matthew BaileyShea, “Agency and the *Adagio*: Mimetic Engagement in Barber’s Op. 11 Quartet,” *Gamut: Online Journal of the Music Theory Society of the Mid-Atlantic* 5, no. 1 (2012): 7–9.

performances of the *Adagio* in varying contexts and includes comprehensive information pertaining to the reception of each performance.¹⁰⁴

In her biographical study, Heyman includes some examples of how twentieth century Anglophone critics responded to the *Adagio*. However, she does not situate these reactions within their cultural context, leaving the broader implications of these critical responses opaque. In this chapter, I contextualize the reception of Barber's *Adagio*. In doing so, I demonstrate that the discourse surrounding reactions to the *Adagio* pitted artistic innovation against tradition, a manufactured dichotomy constructed by critics and intellectuals during the twentieth century. I also reveal how reactions to the *Adagio* offer insight into the twentieth century American musical landscape, particularly how critical responses reveal conflicting notions of the United States' relation to Europe as well as opposing convictions about the "correct" path for American music.

This chapter will primarily engage with Anglophone journalistic criticism to explore how twentieth century dichotomies shaped the response to Barber's work. As Elizabeth Crist argues in her reception study of Copland's Third Symphony, reviews can be read not only as musical criticism but also as "sociocultural commentary, documenting the critical construction of significance and its subsequent transformations."¹⁰⁵ To that end, I will also examine the reception to Barber's Piano Concerto, Op. 38, to illuminate better which tropes stayed the same and which changed as serialism rose to prominence in the United States. I also chose Barber's Piano Concerto because it possesses multiple similarities to the *Adagio*: both compositions, for example, were premiered at a major cultural institution and commissioned for a specific occasion. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that the Piano Concerto was understood by critics as representing a more mature, "modern" style.

¹⁰⁴ Wentzel, *The Adagio of Samuel Barber*.

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth B. Crist, "Critical Politics: The Reception History of Aaron Copland's Third Symphony," *The Musical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2001): 232.

***Adagio for Strings*: Origins and Reception**

The reception history of Barber's *Adagio for Strings* is intertwined with the legacy of Arturo Toscanini, who first came to the United States in 1908 as principal conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, then became director of the New York Philharmonic in 1929 after a fascist takeover of the Italian government.¹⁰⁶ Toscanini was particularly known for his interpretations of Italian and Wagnerian operas as well as Beethoven symphonies.¹⁰⁷ His skillful performances of this repertoire contributed to his celebrity status within the American art music scene: Toscanini was often proclaimed to be "the greatest conductor of all time," an image that orchestras deliberately invested in to pique public interest in their cultural offerings.¹⁰⁸ As Richard Crawford demonstrates, audiences found Toscanini compelling due to "his energy, the command he brought to the podium, his demands for perfection, and his uncanny musical memory. Adding to the legend were his abiding hatred for political fascism and towering rages when rehearsals went badly."¹⁰⁹ Some American critics were enamored with these attributes: *New York Times* critic Olin Downes, for example, lauded Toscanini's intractable standards and dedication to Romantic values such as artistic transcendence:

There are always questions in practical matters of compromise between an ideal and existing conditions. In the sphere of art there can be no such compromises. When an artist of genius and the will that is one of the principal [sic] elements of genius arrives, he must impose his wishes upon the elements about him—human or whatever they may be—and make them the instruments of his creative power. It is only from a source like this that an art purified, alembicated, cleansed of material contacts can come. And this is the achievement of Arturo Toscanini.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 583.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 584.

¹⁰⁸ See also Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini: How He Became an American Culture-God and Helped Create a New Audience for Old Music* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

¹⁰⁹ Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 583. While explaining why he rarely conducted his own works, Barber stated: "I got bored with rehearsing my own music. Some composers adore it, but I don't find it interesting. There's a lack, in me, of pedagogical talent. And when you're guest conducting, you don't have the kind of authority over an orchestra that its regular conductor has—and you need that authority to make them do it right. Toscanini would just get up there and scream 'Stupidi! Imbecilli!' and throw down his watch! I've seen him do that. But he was Toscanini and it was his orchestra." See Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 49.

¹¹⁰ Olin Downes, "The Return of Arturo Toscanini—Color, Music and the Lyric Drama," *New York Times*, January 10, 1926.

American composers were similarly affected by Toscanini's artistry on the podium, and Barber was no exception.¹¹¹ Barber met Toscanini in August 1933 while traveling in Italy with his partner Menotti. Both men were invited to visit Toscanini at his island villa, during which he expressed interest in programming one of Barber's compositions.¹¹² This invitation was notable for two key reasons. First, until the early 1940s Toscanini had almost entirely neglected to perform works by American composers.¹¹³ Second, Barber was still a young composer, so having an internationally renowned conductor premiere one of his pieces enhance the public's awareness of his music.

Five years would pass, however, before Toscanini performed one of Barber's compositions. In 1937, Toscanini heard Artur Rodziński conduct Barber's *Symphony in One Movement* at the Salzburg Festival and expressed renewed interest in Barber's work.¹¹⁴ This interest was partly due to his desire to program an American composition with the newly formed National Broadcasting Company Symphony Orchestra, an ensemble created specifically for Toscanini.¹¹⁵ Rodziński and John F. Royal, an NBC executive, asked Barber to write a ten-minute piece for Toscanini, and in January 1938 Barber sent two pieces: *Essay for Orchestra* and *Adagio for Strings*.¹¹⁶ Toscanini selected both for performance and premiered them on a 5 November 1938 radio broadcast with the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Since Toscanini was known for infrequently programming American works this broadcast held extra significance: as Heyman outlines, the fact that an internationally renowned conductor like Toscanini believed compositions by an American composer were worth performing on a widely accessible platform gave American art music a sense of legitimacy.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 182.

¹¹² Ibid., 184; Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography*, 24.

¹¹³ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 184. Exceptions include Howard Hanson's Symphony no. 2 and two works by Abram Chasins. David Cairns does note that by this point Toscanini was an old man with failing eyesight. See Cairns, "Toscanini, Arturo," *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001.

¹¹⁴ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 184.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 184.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 186.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 190.

This performance attracted the interest of high-profile music critics in prominent American newspapers. Critics who sympathized with Barber's aesthetic sensibility responded positively to the Toscanini premiere and were particularly complimentary toward the *Adagio*. Downes, for example, asserted that "the music proved eminently worth playing ... [it] is not pretentious music. Its author does not pose and posture in his score. He writes with a definite purpose, a clear objective, and a sense of structure."¹¹⁸ Downes also wrote approvingly of the *Adagio*'s economical design: "the composition is most simple when it develops, that the simple chord or figure is the one most significant ... This is the product of a musically creative nature ... who leaves nothing undone to achieve something as perfect in mass and detail as his craftsmanship permits."¹¹⁹ Early criticisms of the *Adagio* in modernist publications paralleled those that were directed at the Violin Concerto in 1939. In the *Modern Music*, for example, Goddard Lieberson argued that Barber's compositional approach simply mimicked those of the past: "It is contemporary only in the sense that the composer is still alive. There is but a fraction of the whole which even suggests an individual technic [sic]; and instead of melodic creativeness and harmonic invention, Mr. Barber has substituted his wealth of experience in listening to the works of other composers."¹²⁰ Arthur Cohn, who also wrote in *Modern Music*, concurred: "No one can deny the technical equipment of this young man, but one may inquire whether he realizes that the year is 1938 and things are not so placid as his carefully tailored quartet would make us believe."¹²¹ This accusation would follow Barber over the course of his career.

One element that is notably absent from Downes's complimentary assessment of the *Adagio* is its status as an *American* work. This is noteworthy given that the 1930s and 1940s were

¹¹⁸ Olin Downes, "Toscanini Plays Two New Works," *New York Times*, November 7, 1938.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Goddard Lieberson, "Over the Air," *Modern Music* 16 (1938): 65–66.

¹²¹ Arthur Cohn, "How News Comes to Philadelphia," *Modern Music* 15 (1938): 237.

characterized by a conscious effort on the part of many American composers to create music that was identifiably “American.”¹²² In addition, composers involved in this endeavor maintained that “the challenge was not to find new styles and techniques to distance contemporary composition from the music of the romantic past, but to find new audiences and modes of expression best suited to the *modern* present.”¹²³ Consequently, Barber was subjected to further criticism because he was deemed to have failed on both counts: his music was not discernably “American” and did not adequately reflect the present moment. Two figures invested in “musical Americanism,” Ashley Pettis and Roy Harris, criticized Barber’s compositional style for these reasons and publicly aired their reservations about the Toscanini premiere in the *New York Times* editorial page. As we will see in the next section, Pettis’s editorial in particular reignited two debates: how to define an American music and who decides the parameters of musical innovation.

Editorial Debates

On 13 November 1938, the *New York Times* published a Letter to the Editor by Pettis, a pianist and composer who was deeply invested in the Americanist project and dedicated to championing the work of emerging American composers. In 1935, for example, he founded the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory, and articulated its aims and goals as follows:

Here music expressive of every shade of thought and feeling peculiar to this moment in history will have a hearing. We will consider every type of music written by competent musicians. The purpose of these Forums is to provide an opportunity for serious composers residing in America, both known and unknown, to hear their own compositions and to test audience reaction.¹²⁴

¹²² Aaron Copland, for example, stated “I was anxious to write a work that would immediately be recognized as American in character. This desire to be ‘American’ was symptomatic of the period.” See “Composer from Brooklyn: An Autobiographical Sketch,” in Aaron Copland, *Our New Music: Leading Composers in Europe and America* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1941), 225.

¹²³ Elizabeth Bergman Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5. For more on the Composers’ Forum see Melissa J. de Graff, *The New York Composers’ Forum Concerts, 1935–1940* (Rochester: University of Rochester, 2013).

¹²⁴ Ashley Pettis, “The WPA and the American Composer,” *The Musical Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1940): 103.

As the above statement reveals, Pettis hoped the Composer's Forum-Laboratory would facilitate a "symbiotic" relationship between audience and composer: the audience would hear American music that was not being programmed by more prominent cultural institutions, and the composer would learn what resonated with the American listeners. The focus on "every shade of thought and feeling *peculiar to this moment in history* (emphasis mine)" is also revealing, since this was a key critique that Pettis would level at Barber in his 1938 *New York Times* Letter to the Editor.¹²⁵

Pettis opened his letter by stressing the musically conservative and regressive nature of Barber's compositional style stating that "one listened in vain for evidences of youthful vigor, freshness, for fire, for use of a contemporary idiom."¹²⁶ He also contended that Barber's *Essay for Orchestra* and *Adagio for Strings* were examples of "authentic, dull, serious music—utterly anachronistic."¹²⁷ For this reason, Pettis maintained that Toscanini's radio broadcast was a missed opportunity to showcase the American musical and cultural life. In other words, it failed to "[acquaint] the public with the fact that there are serious, contemporary works [that would also] provide fresh impetus and incentive to our musical craftsman."¹²⁸

Pettis also argued that programming Barber's music on a widely accessible medium like the radio could negatively impact "the advance of [American] musicians."¹²⁹ Pettis worried young American composers might conclude that their music would only be programmed by major cultural institutions and internationally renowned composers if they deliberately wrote for audiences who "listen[ed] with ears of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at the latest—whose criteria are that the 'new' music should have the familiar melodic, harmonic, rhythmic characteristics of the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 103.

¹²⁶ Ashley Pettis, "From the Mailbag: 'Important' American Music," *New York Times*, November 13, 1938.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

past, that it be a hodge-podge of clichés, that it presupposes no spirit or musical adventure on the part of either performers or public.”¹³⁰

Pettis’s critiques were echoed by Roy Harris, who wrote his own Letter to the Editor to the *New York Times* on 27 November 1938.¹³¹ Like Pettis, Harris was also committed to the creation of a distinctly American sound, but he declined to assess Barber’s compositional style specifically. He instead soliloquized on the dichotomy between tradition and innovation by portraying the American musical landscape as a battle between “old” and “new” compositional styles. Composers who used more traditional compositional techniques were described by Harris as the “venerable” cohort, that is, those who contributed to American musical life by cultivating the best of the European art music tradition.¹³² In comparison, Harris described experimental composers as the “vulnerable” cohort, for although young musical innovators had talent and ambition, they possessed little agency and power within major cultural institutions in the United States.¹³³ However, Harris argued that the future of American music depended on the “vulnerable” cohort, for the venerable could “only continue to offer the past.”¹³⁴

Both Pettis and Harris articulated values that imbued nearly all Anglophone reception of Barber’s music. These values are indicative of what Taruskin calls the “Frankfurt School paradigm,” which casts the history of twentieth century art music as a division between “an avant-garde of heroic resisters” on the one hand and “the homogenizing commercial juggernaut known as the Culture Industry” on the other.¹³⁵ However, the reception to Toscanini’s premiere of Barber’s *Essay for Orchestra* and *Adagio for Strings* was also saddled with nationalist concerns. By highlighting the so-

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Roy Harris, “From the Mailbag: The Old and the New,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1938.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, xviii.

called “regressive” features of Barber’s music—particularly lyricism, formal craftsmanship, and tonality—critics like Pettis and Harris connected it to the nineteenth century European tradition they wished to escape. As Carol Oja argues, “a central challenge for American modernists was to break a long-held colonialist psychology—to gain cultural confidence apart from the continent. At the same time, however, they aimed for recognition in an international arena.”¹³⁶ Pettis and Harris, therefore, were not perturbed by Toscanini’s decision to program American compositions, but rather that the pieces he chose to perform were not adequately “American.”

Pettis’s and Harris’s Letters to the Editor did not go unanswered: composers and performers who shared Barber’s aesthetic sensibility or musical approach—including Menotti, Alexander Kelberine, and Franco Autori—challenged Pettis’s and Harris’s critiques by contesting their definitions of Americanism and their beliefs surrounding musical innovation. Menotti, for example, believed that Pettis’s understanding of modernist music was essentially rooted in a compositional style developed in Paris, where many American avant-garde composers went to study.¹³⁷ Menotti maintained that this style was uninteresting to American audiences, faulted Pettis for failing to recognize this, and—in a somewhat ironic twist—accused *Pettis* of regressive views. Moreover, Menotti argued that Pettis’s preoccupation with Paris had produced an understanding of musical innovation that was far too limited; for Menotti, it was possible to innovate and transform musical features associated with nineteenth century Romanticism as well: “If Mr. Barber dares to defy the servile limitations of that [Parisian] style (which has been called American music) and experiments successfully with melodic line and new form, is he not to be praised for his courage?”¹³⁸ In this way,

¹³⁶ Carol Oja, “Gershwin and the American Modernists of the 1920s,” *The Musical Quarterly* 78, No. 4 (1994): 661.

¹³⁷ Gian Carlo Menotti, “From the Mailbag: Which is ‘Modern’ Music?” *New York Times*, November 20, 1938.

¹³⁸ Ibid. Menotti reiterated this belief in a 1981 interview with Peter Dickinson. Menotti stated: “I feel that it’s such a tragic thing that especially nowadays we consider art as a kind of industry. It’s got to be bigger and better and more modern. Art doesn’t change. A piece of pre-Colombian sculpture is no better or worse than a sculpture by Henry Moore. They are two different worlds, but art doesn’t develop, doesn’t change. The language may change, but we are not condemned to follow a trend of development in any way. In literature, where Thomas Mann wrote at the same time as

Menotti flipped Pettis's value system so that the features Pettis considered to be artistic shortcomings instead became creative advantages.

The Russian-American pianist Alexander Kelberine also believed that Pettis's parameters for what could be considered "modern" music were too restrictive and lacking in clarity: "Mr. Pettis obviously belongs to that group of thinkers which believes its particular brand of understanding of what comprises 'a contemporary idiom' is absolute and should prevail . . . What does Mr. Pettis really mean by 'contemporary idiom' or contemporary 'tendency'? Must a work be cacophonous in order to be of today?"¹³⁹ Kelberine also questioned the idea that a composer must reflect the spirit of the current moment arguing that an artist could instead "record the inner turmoil that wells within him as he views reality." This perspective, which emphasizes the subjectivity of the artist, is rooted in nineteenth-century Romantic thought.

The Piano Concerto: Origins and Reception

Like the *Adagio for Strings*, Barber's Piano Concerto, Op. 38, was commissioned for a specific occasion. In 1959, Barber was asked to compose a piano concerto in honor of the publisher G. Schirmer's hundredth anniversary, which coincided with the opening week of concerts in Lincoln Center's newly opened Philharmonic Hall.¹⁴⁰ According to G. Schirmer executive Hans Heinsheimer, Barber was the obvious choice: "There was no one else; Barber was our most popular composer—our best."¹⁴¹ As noted in Chapter One, Barber wrote this concerto in collaboration with John Browning, incorporating his technical abilities and musical strengths into its creation. Specific aspects of his training at Juilliard with Rosina Lhévinne, such as a focus on unique pedaling

James Joyce, people are free to write anything they want. Poetry is the same thing—we have Ezra Pound and we have Philip Larkin..." See Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 62.

¹³⁹ Alexander Kelberine, "From The Mailbag: What is 'Contemporary Idiom?'" *New York Times*, November 14, 1938.

¹⁴⁰ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 451.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 452.

techniques and a proficiency in doubled sixths and octaves, were utilized.¹⁴² The concerto was also influenced by Vladimir Horowitz, who heard it prior to the premiere performance. It was Horowitz, for example, who urged Barber to modify certain aspects of the third movement, particularly the sixteenth note passages that Browning believed were unplayable at Barber's desired tempo.¹⁴³

Browning gave the premiere performance of Barber's Piano Concerto on 24 September 1962 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Philharmonic Hall.¹⁴⁴ His interpretation was reportedly well-received by the audience, who gave him multiple standing ovations. Critics largely concurred with the public: in the *New York Journal-American*, for example, Miles Kastendieck praised Browning's "exhilaration and musical persuasiveness, which Kastendieck thought helped reveal "just how good the concerto is."¹⁴⁵ Similarly, in the *New York Times* Harold C. Schonberg praised Browning's technical expertise and virtuosity: "Mr. Browning, one of the more expert technicians around, gave a very strong performance, and it will be even stronger when he works his way into the score ... Mr. Browning stormed the work, surmounted the peaks and proved himself to be a virtuoso with a fine sense of line. In music like this he is an eminently satisfactory pianist."¹⁴⁶ The Piano Concerto was a high point in Barber's career, for he won two awards for the piece shortly thereafter: his second Pulitzer Prize in 1963, and a belated Music Critics Choice Award in 1964.¹⁴⁷

The Piano Concerto's reception history overlaps with that of the *Adagio for Strings* in two significant ways. First, although interest in musical Americanism as a compositional approach had waned by the early 1950s, critics still invoked "Americanism" in their discussions around the

¹⁴² Ibid., 453.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 457. Barber acknowledged Horowitz's impact on his writing for piano generally-speaking: "Horowitz had a great influence on me for writing for piano—good God! He taught me so much. He used to play Scriabin for me all night in Mt. Kisco." See Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 42.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 457.

¹⁴⁵ Miles Kastendieck, "Barber Concerto Scores a Hit," *New York Journal-American*, September 25, 1962.

¹⁴⁶ Harold C. Schonberg, "Browning is Soloist in Premiere at Hall," *New York Times*, September 25, 1962.

¹⁴⁷ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 460.

concerto's status within the trajectory of twentieth century music.¹⁴⁸ Kastendieck, for example, described the concerto's 24 September 1962 premiere as "the birth of an American classic."¹⁴⁹ The American pianist Ruth Laredo, however, cited "Americanness" while speculating why Barber's Piano Concerto continued to be underperformed compared to other piano concertos in the established repertory. In 1984 she stated: "I cannot explain why it isn't played. Perhaps because it is an American piece, people are inclined not to take it seriously. But it's an exciting, wonderful piece, and I'm very happy to be playing it."¹⁵⁰

Second, critics continued to emphasize the lyricism and emotional directness of Barber's writing but also noted the more "experimental" or "modern" features of Barber's Piano Concerto, particularly harmonic dissonances, unusual key relationships, and rhythmic complexity. Some critics considered Barber's ability to balance his Romantic sensibilities with more "modern" characteristics to be a positive dimension of his compositional style. Kastendieck, for instance, believed this aspect appealed to American concertgoers: "Aside from being an exciting piece rhythmically, it is unashamedly melodic ... undoubtedly, the latter aspect finding favor with the audience, for people even in the sixth decade of the century still find a well-turned melodic line most gratifying."¹⁵¹ Kastendieck's pointed remark regarding listeners who "still find a well-turned melodic line most gratifying" indicates his awareness that Barber was working in a musical climate in which experimentalism and serialism had risen in status following the Second World War even though such approaches were not audience friendly.¹⁵² As a result, Kastendieck maintained that the Romantic nature of Barber's Piano Concerto was an admirable demonstration of Barber's commitment to his

¹⁴⁸ Emily Abrams Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower: Musical Americanism and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

¹⁴⁹ Kastendieck, "Barber Concerto Scores a Hit."

¹⁵⁰ Rena Fruchter, "A Challenge for Miss Laredo," *New York Times*, January 1, 1984.

¹⁵¹ Kastendieck, "Barber Concerto Scores a Hit."

¹⁵² Ansari, *The Sound of a Superpower*, 2. See also Ben Earle, "Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand Op. 36: British Attempts to Popularize Schoenberg," *Music & Letters* 84, no. 4 (November 2003): 608–643.

artistic values: “[Barber] has not been afraid to be himself in the midst of a whirlpool of musical currents surrounding him. The concerto is of this century but also of the mainstream of traditional music.”¹⁵³ Schonberg likewise took note of the “contemporary yet traditional” nature of Barber’s Piano Concerto, first drawing comparisons between Barber and Sergei Prokofiev:

The Concerto is based, roughly, on such contemporary works as Prokofieff’s Third [Concerto]; and, indeed, much of the piano writing is strongly Prokofieffan [sic]. No standard key relationships are present, the writing for solo piano is [a] mixture of romanticism and everything but tone clusters, and the five-four finale is a first cousin to the toccata-like conclusion of the Prokofieff Seventh Sonata.¹⁵⁴

Schonberg also stressed the lyricism underlying Barber’s compositional style, asserting that Barber’s Piano Concerto possessed “a strong melodic profile, a lyric slow movement and a sense of confidence in the entire conception—the confidence that comes only from an experienced composer engaged in a work that interests him.”¹⁵⁵ Interestingly, just one year later Schonberg employed gendered rhetoric in his discussion of Barber’s compositional style. Browning performed Barber’s Piano Concerto in a November 1963 concert with the New York Philharmonic, which Schonberg reviewed for the *New York Times*. Schonberg praised Barber’s understanding of pianistic techniques, maintaining that “the piano writing is glittering—very difficult (sometimes much more difficult, even, than it sounds), very effective, and very idiomatic. Mr. Barber is not one of those who look on the piano primarily as a percussive instrument, though there is that element too in the last movement.”¹⁵⁶ Schonberg also asserted once again that the concerto was “Prokofiev-like,” particularly the third movement with “its eccentric five-eight meter.”¹⁵⁷ In this review of the piano concerto, however, Schonberg linked Barber’s aesthetic sensibility with femininity: “Mr. Barber has tempered Prokofiev’s tensile approach with something more feminine, and basically, 19th-century. It

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Schonberg, “Browning is Soloist in Premiere at Hall.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Harold C. Schonberg, “John Browning Soloist at Philharmonic Hall,” *New York Times*, November 8, 1963.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

may be imitation 19th-century, but is a most skillful imitation.”¹⁵⁸ The use of gendered language in relation to music-making was not new to the twentieth century. Susan McClary for example, observes that

Throughout its history in the West, music has been an activity fought over bitterly in terms of gender identity. The charge that musicians or devotees of music are ‘effeminate’ goes back as far as recorded documentation about music, and music’s association with the body ... and with subjectivity has led to its being relegated in many historical periods to what was understood as a ‘feminine’ realm.¹⁵⁹

The practice of associating music with effeminacy continued in the twentieth century in part because women had become an indispensable force within the realm of American concert music. As Carol Oja outlines, by the early nineteenth century women had established themselves “as hostesses of the parlor, as supporters of the opera and symphony, as teachers, and as vigorous activists through music clubs.”¹⁶⁰ Consequently, American concert music came to be understood as a “feminized sphere,” and the anxieties this produced, permeated twentieth century critical discourse.¹⁶¹

Furthermore, women were not only identified with classical music but also with the nineteenth-century European art music tradition in particular. As Oja argues, “Increasingly, consonant music—especially the pretty sort representing long-standing European traditions—was linked with women or effeminacy, while dissonance was quickly labeled ‘manly’ or ‘virile.’”¹⁶²

Twentieth century queer composers such as Barber, therefore, were also impacted by such attitudes.¹⁶³ This dichotomy is discernible in Schonberg’s 1963 analysis of Barber’s Piano Concerto,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Susan McClary, “A Material Girl in Bluebird’s Castle,” in *Reading Music: Selected Essays* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007): 127.

¹⁶⁰ Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 223.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 223.

¹⁶² Ibid., 225.

¹⁶³ Studies that examine gender and sexuality in relation to Barber’s life and music have begun to emerge. Examples include Jessica Holmes, “Composing in America’s Closet: Queer Encoding in Barber and Menotti’s Opera *Vanessa*,” *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 1 (2008): 53–65; Kyle Kaplan, “At Home with Barber: *Vanessa* and the Queer 1950s.” Master’s thesis, McGill University, 2014; Michael S. Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imaginary Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 155–203. Nadine Hubbs also briefly mentions Barber in her study of twentieth century queer composers and the formation of an “American” sound. See

which both contrasts Barber's lyricism with Prokofiev's "tensile" approach and associates stylistic elements reminiscent of the nineteenth century with femininity. Schonberg's use of gendered labels can thus be understood as type of "critical weapon," one which, as Oja argues, could be used to "[brand] older composers whose music was not perched on the cutting edge."¹⁶⁴

Gendered language has historically infused discussions surrounding the dichotomy between high art and low culture as well. As Andreas Huyssen states, "It is indeed striking to observe how the political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities."¹⁶⁵ One might argue that Barber's music cannot be classified as part of the so-called "mass culture" given that his compositions were supported by institutions associated with "high culture," such as the Metropolitan Opera and New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Yet, as the critical reception in this chapter demonstrates, Barber's perceived musical "conservatism" denied him entry into the realm of highbrow art, which, by the mid-twentieth century, was closely allied with elite modernism. Barber's contributions, therefore, as well as certain aspects of his artistic worldview, complicated the divisions that were characteristic of twentieth century modernist discourse. As a result, the category of "middlebrow," which describes the processes of compromise and mediation between mass culture and high culture, offers a useful framework for understanding Barber's contributions and career.

Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). Studies that focus on gender and sexuality in relation to the reception history of Barber's music is particularly undertheorized. However, such questions extend beyond the scope of this study at present.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 225.

¹⁶⁵ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 47.

CHAPTER 3

SAMUEL BARBER AND MIDDLEBROW CULTURE: POLARIZATION, CONTRADICTION, AND ANXIETY WITHIN TWENTIETH CENTURY ART MUSIC RECEPTION

Is not beauty in music too often confused with something which lets the ears lie back in an easy-chair? Many sounds that we are used to do not bother us, and for that reason are we not too easily inclined to call them beautiful?¹⁶⁶

—Charles Ives

Introduction

In the introduction to her biographical study, Barbara Heyman describes Barber's compositional approach as one which "rarely responded to experimental trends ... instead pursuing a path marked by a vocally inspired lyricism and a commitment to the tonal language and many of the forms of late nineteenth century music," elements commonly characterized as "neo-Romantic" when they appeared in twentieth-century music.¹⁶⁷ Howard Pollack likewise considers the neo-Romantic designation to be "accurate as far as it goes," acknowledging that Barber wrote two "rather torrid" grand operas and exhibited a lifelong affinity for nineteenth-century composers like Schubert and Brahms.¹⁶⁸ However, Pollack also asserts that Barber's musical style derives more from the "postromantic styles of the early twentieth century" rather than the Romantic era, arguing that modernist features infused his melodic and harmonic language even at the start of his compositional career.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, in his analysis of Barber's String Quartet, Op. 11, Matthew BaileyShea observes that although the famous middle movement possesses an "archaic sound, with Renaissance-like polyphony and simple tertian harmonies," the first and third movements are far more "modern" in

¹⁶⁶ Charles Ives, "Postface to 114 Songs," in *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. Daniel Albright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 159.

¹⁶⁷ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 1.

¹⁶⁸ Howard Pollack, "Samuel Barber, Jean Sibelius, and the Making of an American Romantic," *Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000): 175.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 175. Similarly, Walter Simmons asserts that "the earlier Neo-Romantics were not reviving a style from the past—they were evolving along a continuum still very much alive." See Walter Simmons, *Voices in the Wilderness: Six American Neo-Romantic Composers* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 10.

comparison, containing a “heavy emphasis on augmented triads, hexatonic collections, and occasional patches of atonality” throughout.¹⁷⁰

Studies that attempt to contextualize Barber’s compositions within the history of twentieth century American art music often focus either on elements associated with neo-Romanticism or his utilization of experimental techniques, such as serialism. Both approaches, however, compartmentalize Barber’s contributions in ways that limit our understanding of his place in twentieth century music history. Viewing Barber as simply an American neo-Romantic—or emphasizing his use of experimental compositional techniques to establish him as an innovative “modernist” after all—subscribes to what Peter Franklin calls a “mythic picture” in which modernists were cast in opposition to a “reactionary” collection of populists and traditionalists.¹⁷¹ Building on the work of scholars such as Christopher Chowrimootoo, I argue that the cultural category of “middlebrow” offers a productive middle path for understanding how Barber’s musical contributions were understood and valued, both by his contemporaries and by audiences and critics today. Viewing Barber’s music through a middlebrow framework illuminates why twentieth century composers and cultural critics responded to Barber’s work in such a polarized and contradictory manner, as well as how and why Barber remained true to his own artistic voice despite the criticisms he received. In this chapter, therefore, I will first provide an overview of middlebrow as understood by twentieth century critics. I will then analyze Anglophone journalistic criticism to trace how attitudes toward the middlebrow shaped twentieth century assessments of Barber’s work.

Contextualizing Middlebrow Culture

In her analysis of the Federal Art Project and its relationship to middlebrow culture, Victoria Grieve notes that the United States experienced a “monumental shift from a producer to a

¹⁷⁰ BaileyShea, “Agency and the Adagio,” 8.

¹⁷¹ Franklin, *The Idea of Music*, xiii.

consumer society during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”¹⁷² This development was accompanied by a rise in mass technology, which resulted in increased access to cultural forms and institutions.¹⁷³ Twentieth century intellectuals and critics responded to these changes by attempting to “restore order to a shifting cultural terrain,” which—as Christopher Chowrimootoo and Kate Guthrie discuss—involved dividing consumers and products into polarized categories, lowbrow and highbrow.¹⁷⁴ “Lowbrows” were believed to be content with “mindless entertainment” and therefore susceptible to brazen commercialization.¹⁷⁵ “Highbrows,” on the other hand, deliberately avoided mass culture in favor of art that prioritized aesthetic ideals such as autonomy and originality.¹⁷⁶ Complicating this dichotomy, however, were the “middlebrows,” described by Chowrimootoo and Guthrie as those who sought synthesis, mediation, and compromise between seemingly “oppositional” artistic values: difficulty and accessibility, rationality and sentimentality, complexity and clarity.¹⁷⁷

One of the earliest documented uses of the term “middlebrow” appeared in a 1925 edition of *Punch* magazine, which described middlebrow consumers as “people who are hoping that someday they will get used to stuff they ought to like.”¹⁷⁸ Satirical sentiments aside, this characterization conveyed what Chowrimootoo describes as “seemingly paradoxical charges of philistinism and pretentiousness,” since middlebrow consumers were disdained for their lack of cultural sophistication yet condemned for striving to obtain it.¹⁷⁹ The American magazine editor Russell Lynes highlighted this dynamic in his now well-known 1949 *Harper’s* essay “Highbrow,

¹⁷² Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 12.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷⁴ Christopher Chowrimootoo and Kate Guthrie, “Introduction: Colloquy Musicology and the Middlebrow.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 73 no. 2, (2020): 328.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 328.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 328.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

¹⁷⁸ Anon., “The Middlebrow,” *Punch* 169 (1925): 673. Quoted in Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 9.

¹⁷⁹ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 9.

Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” outlining the relationship between cultural hierarchies and class mobility by dividing the middlebrow into “upper” and “lower middlebrow.”¹⁸⁰ Lynes described upper middlebrows as those who “devote themselves professionally to the dissemination of ideas and cultural artifacts, and, not in the least incidentally, make a living along the way,” such as publishers, educators, art dealers, and museum directors.¹⁸¹ Upper middlebrows, in other words, sought to make high culture available for the masses.¹⁸² Lower middlebrows, on the other hand, consumed the high art curated by upper middlebrows: they participated in book clubs, took adult education classes, and attended concerts or lectures.¹⁸³ Lynes also asserted that the upper middlebrow is “caught between the muses and the masses,” or caught between a desire to support the work of “serious” artists with a need to create revenue for a given cultural institution.¹⁸⁴ According to Lynes, self-described highbrows maintained that this balancing act produced “nothing but compromise and mediocrity.”¹⁸⁵ For this reason, middlebrows became the target of especially charged denunciations.

In 1932, for example, Virginia Woolf derided the middlebrow consumer as “the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige.”¹⁸⁶ As Joan Rubin notes, Woolf explicitly associated the middlebrow with “the corruption of taste by commercial interests,” an assumption that “reverberated through every subsequent discussion of the term.”¹⁸⁷ In 1948, for example, Clement Greenberg lamented the “insidiousness” of middlebrow culture, particularly its propensity

¹⁸⁰ Russell Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1949: 25. See also Richard Taruskin, “Which Way is Up? On the Sociology of Taste,” in *Cursed Questions: On Music and Its Social Practices* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020): 351–352.

¹⁸¹ Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” 25.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸⁶ Woolf, “Middlebrow,” 115.

¹⁸⁷ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 11.

for “devaluating the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest, and stultifying the wise.”¹⁸⁸ The following year, Lynes likewise maintained that “the highbrow sees as his real enemy the middlebrow, whom he regards as a pretentious and frivolous man or woman who uses culture to satisfy social or business ambitions.”¹⁸⁹ Similarly, in 1960 Dwight MacDonald asserted that middlebrow culture was more sinister and alarming than the lowbrow because it “incorporates so much of the avant-garde.”¹⁹⁰ These criticisms against the middlebrow also mirrored those leveled against mass culture: middlebrow consumers and products were castigated for succumbing to the crimes of “standardization, of selling out to the superficial whims of the marketplace, and of the associated loss of individuality.”¹⁹¹ As Levine succinctly delineates “anything that produced a group atmosphere, a mass ethos, was culturally suspect.”¹⁹² It is crucial to note, however, that the division between high art and mass culture which solidified in the United States by the twentieth century is a social construction, the result of what Levine describes as a “process of sacralization” in which “the essential purpose of [American] temples of culture” was redefined:

the masterworks of the classic composers were to be performed in their entirety by highly trained musicians on programs free from the contamination of lesser works or lesser genres, free from the interference of audience or performer, free from the distractions of the mundane; audiences were to approach the masters and their works with proper respect and proper seriousness, for aesthetic and spiritual elevation rather than mere entertainment was the goal.¹⁹³

Such attitudes would have been foreign to consumers and producers of art music at the advent of the nineteenth century. During the early nineteenth century, for example, art forms such as opera were experienced by audiences across socioeconomic divides: as Levine articulates, opera was “*simultaneously* popular and elite ... attended both by large numbers of people who derived great

¹⁸⁸ Clement Greenberg, “The State of American Writing,” *Partisan Review*, 15 (August 1948): 879.

¹⁸⁹ Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” 21.

¹⁹⁰ Dwight MacDonald, “Masscult & Midcult,” in *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1952), 51.

¹⁹¹ Chowrimootoo and Guthrie, “Colloquy,” 328.

¹⁹² Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990): 164.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 132, 167. See also Taruskin, “Resisting the Rite,” 399.

pleasure from it and experienced it in the context of their normal everyday culture, *and* by smaller socially and economically elite groups who derived both pleasure and social confirmation from it.”¹⁹⁴ In addition, musical styles and genres were far less hierarchical during the nineteenth century. Bands and orchestras, for example, would program “light pieces” such as polkas, waltzes, and marches alongside overtures and symphonies.¹⁹⁵ Similarly, it was common for American opera companies to bolster or replace arias with popular songs, as well as translate foreign-language operas into English.¹⁹⁶ Operas were also frequently performed alongside other forms of popular entertainment, such as comic plays.¹⁹⁷ However, over the course of the nineteenth century, as Levine details, the process of sacralization “call[ed] into question the “traditional practice of mixing musical genres and presenting audiences with an eclectic feast.”¹⁹⁸ It is important to note that the middlebrow was an active mediation of high art and mass culture rather than a static artistic style.¹⁹⁹ Modernists, therefore, were suspicious of middlebrows because they believed that drawing upon high and low culture—a process which resulted in eclecticism, synthesis, and compromise—detracted from modernist aims. Chowrimootoo observes, for example that composers like Benjamin Britten, Aaron Copland, and Dmitri Shostakovich were accused of “drawing superficially on modernist prestige while simultaneously pandering to vulgarities in the gallery.”²⁰⁰ Barber experienced similar criticisms. As Chapter Two demonstrated, a key aspect of Barber’s reception history is the contention that Barber failed to capture the contemporary moment and create music that was sufficiently modern. However, as this chapter will show, when Barber did incorporate modern idioms into his compositions, he was accused of superficiality, inconsistency, and insincerity. Furthermore,

¹⁹⁴ Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 86.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90, 93.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁹⁹ Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, viii.

²⁰⁰ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 3.

although multiple Anglophone critics explicitly described Barber's compositional style as "high middlebrow," the deficiencies associated with this classification shape the critical reception to his work, even if the exact term is not invoked.

Contesting the Neo-Romantic Label

Although Barber is often labeled a neo-Romantic today, his contemporaries struggled to find a label that accurately described his compositional style. In his 1941 review of Barber's Violin Concerto, for example, Virgil Thomson wrote: "I have wondered for some years whether Barber can be considered a neo-Romantic composer, as that term has been understood to represent the dominant Parisian school of the past ten years. I think not."²⁰¹ Thomson maintained that neo-Romanticism was a distinctly French phenomenon associated with Henri Sauguet in particular. Although Thomson conceded that Barber and Sauguet shared the same "abstention from ostentatious dissonance" and belonged to the same "cult of the poetic," he argued that Barber had not settled upon these stylistic traits through "penetrative esthetic reflection."²⁰² As a result, Thomson believed Barber should be considered "a new kind of academic. Not the storming, dissonance-mongering academic ... But the gentle sweet-singing academic."²⁰³

The American poet Robert Horan also objected to labeling Barber a neo-Romantic, albeit for different reasons. In 1943 Horan wrote an article for *Modern Music* examining Barber and his music. Horan opened his analysis by asserting that the American art music landscape was suffering from "a fraudulent energy" marked by "an over-emphasis everywhere on the periphery, the marginalia, the function or the contemporaneity of music."²⁰⁴ In other words, Horan believed a disproportionate amount of attention was being paid to esoteric musical styles. For this reason,

²⁰¹ Virgil Thomson, "Academism with Charm," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 12, 1941.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Robert Horan, "American Composers, IXI: Samuel Barber," *Modern Music* 20, no. 3 (1943): 161.

Horan maintained that “it is therefore refreshing and uncommon to discover individuals who, without resorting to any current standards of methods or mannerisms, have entered the front-rank of contemporary composition.”²⁰⁵ Horan believed Barber was one such composer, a view that shaped his objection to classifying Barber a neo-Romantic. Horan asserted that “Barber’s music is not ‘neo’-anything. It is actually and absurdly romantic in an age when romanticism is the catchword of fools and prophets ... it cannot be ‘the answer’ to anything or the direction that music *must* take, for its distinction is entirely individual.”²⁰⁶ For Horan, Barber’s musical approach was wholly unique because it remained committed to Romanticism in the midst of a musical climate that considered modernism to be the way forward. Additionally, in 1948 Nathan Broder likewise argued that classifying Barber as a neo-Romantic failed to capture how Barber’s compositional style changed over time. Broder asserted:

Labeling Barber’s music neo-Romantic, while helpful in describing his earlier works, disregards significant elements in his later and more important products. Traditional procedures are characteristic of all Barber’s music up to about 1939. After that time, however, they begin to be mingled with, or replaced by, methods that can only have arisen in the musical climate of our time.²⁰⁷

Although Thomson, Horan, and Broder fail to mention cultural hierarchies in their rationales, such ideas nonetheless shaped their approaches to this question. Broder, for example, maintained that the neo-Romantic designation failed to account for the eclecticism of Barber’s compositional style, a trait associated with the middlebrow. Although some critics praised the eclecticism of Barber’s output, others believed this trait demonstrated that Barber lacked artistic individuality.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 161.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 168.

²⁰⁷ Nathan Broder, “The Music of Samuel Barber,” *Musical Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1948): 325. Broder wrote the first biography on Barber. See Broder, *Samuel Barber* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1954).

Romanticism, Emotion, Individuality

Thomson, a prolific composer himself, was most influential as a music critic. He believed the American art music scene was characterized by a power imbalance that prioritized European culture at the expense of American contributions and sought to correct this in his cultural criticism.²⁰⁸ As Chowrimootoo notes, Thomson's critiques often stemmed from a disapproval toward "sentimental nostalgia," a trait that Thomson believed limited artistic progress.²⁰⁹ Thomson considered the popularity of composers like Jean Sibelius, for example, to be evidence of the provincialism and traditionalism that continued to characterize Anglo-American middlebrow creatives in particular.²¹⁰ Thomson also expressed skepticism toward music that drew upon disparate stylistic traditions: in a 1961 speech to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, for example, he turned his attention toward twentieth century composers who wrote in a style reminiscent of nineteenth-century Romanticism, arguing that "the eclectic Romantics, with no conservative support left them, have moved into the neo-classical and neo-Romantic neighborhoods ... the result is a melting pot, where everybody practices at least a little bit all the techniques, and everybody's music begins to sound the same."²¹¹ Although Thomson did not invoke the term "middlebrow" in this instance, his reference to "*eclectic* Romantics (emphasis mine)," as well as the lack of clear stylistic divisions that their methods produced, nonetheless resonates as a critique of middlebrows.

In 1944, for example, Thomson reviewed Barber's Second Symphony for the *New York Herald Tribune* and expressed dissatisfaction with how he utilized so-called "contemporary" idioms

²⁰⁸ Dismissiveness and derision toward the offerings of American culture can also be found in nineteenth century. As Lawrence Levine recounts, in 1884 Richard Grant White was asked to write a history of American music and "refused for lack of an American music to write about." Similarly, John Sullivan Dwight referred to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of American music history as "Our Dark Age in Music. See Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 143, 144.

²⁰⁹ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 12.

²¹⁰ See Pollack, "Samuel Barber, Jean Sibelius, and the Making of an American Romantic," *Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000) and Glenda Goss, *Jean Sibelius and Olin Downes: Music, Friendship, and Criticism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995).

²¹¹ Richard Kostelanetz, ed. *Virgil Thomson: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 164.

such as dissonant harmonic writing. Thomson argued that the modernist features in this symphony were superficial and inauthentic: “the [Second Symphony] is modernistic on the surface; at least an effort has been made to write in the dissonant style. But ... Barber does not handle dissonant counterpoint with much freedom.”²¹² Some critics argued that Barber’s inability to successfully incorporate modernist techniques into his work rendered his style derivative and unimaginative rather than mature and innovative. In 1937, for example, Francis Perkins wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that Barber’s *Symphony in One Movement* contained certain passages indicating Barber’s maturity as an artist was still developing: “more room is left for emotional development as a creative artist, suggesting that the composer has not yet fully integrated his individual musical style ... immediately identifiable derivations are few—a hint or two of Brahms here, a reminder of Sibelius there, but such hints are not important.”²¹³ Accusations regarding Barber’s lack of individuality, however, continued to follow Barber over the course of his career. In 1939, for example, *The Times* described Barber’s *Essay for Orchestra*, Op. 12, as “well-constructed from not very appealing material ... [T]hough it does not suggest a composer of outstanding originality, it avoids triteness and false brilliance.”²¹⁴ Similarly, in 1958 the *Musical Times* described this flaw in Barber’s opera *Vanessa* as particularly regrettable considering Barber’s obvious technical skill as a composer:

[Barber] furnished a neo-Straussian score of quite superlative dullness. The irony of this misadventure lay in the fact that Barber showed an extraordinary technical skill in his handling of words ... He revealed too an enviable resource and sureness of touch in his contrivance of orchestral commentary, yet even this could not disguise the startling lack of individuality in the music itself.²¹⁵

In 1963 the *Musical Times* responded to Barber’s Piano Concerto in similar terms, with the reviewer describing the piece as “secondhand—a resourceful imitation, never the real thing.”²¹⁶

²¹² Virgil Thomson, “More Barber,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 10, 1944.

²¹³ Francis Perkins, “Philharmonic Plays Work of Barber,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 26, 1937.

²¹⁴ “Promenade Concert,” *The Times*, August 25, 1939.

²¹⁵ Robin Hull, “Broadcast Music,” *Musical Times*, (October 1958): 546.

²¹⁶ Ronald Crichton, “London Music,” *Musical Times*, (March 1963): 192.

Not all critics regarded Barber's incorporation of modernist elements in a negative light, however. In 1942, for example, Howard Taubman wrote in the *New York Times* that although Barber was still a young composer, "he is mature enough to know the path that is best for him. He has arrived at his own style, and though those who are always hunting for reminiscences rather than marks of individuality speak of the influence of Sibelius, Mr. Barber's music can stand on its own."²¹⁷ A 1950 review of Barber's Piano Sonata, Op. 28, in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* praised Barber for his ability to balance commitments to nineteenth-century Romanticism with twentieth-century idioms: "Significantly, the score is not black with notes, and the rhythms are not involved with pseudo-American or frantically 'modern' jitters. Its tone is bold but not percussive, its idiom contemporary but not scornful of the cumulative worth of prior music."²¹⁸ Some critics believed this approach endeared Barber to audiences: a 1951 article in the British publication *Gramophone*, for example, argued that Barber's compositions were "superior examples of a modern style that, while remaining true to its own laws of harmonic development, can without difficulty be understood and enjoyed even by listeners whose taste does not incline toward contemporary music in general."²¹⁹ However, the continued focus on Barber's perceived lack of individuality is a key modernist critique: as Peter Franklin outlines, autonomous art is that which "rejects all that hampers or in any way taints his personal freedom and individualism. All clichés are to be examined, all popular-art-inspired sentimentality and lazy thinking is to be rejected."²²⁰ In addition, lack of individuality was also associated with eclecticism: as Chowrimootoo notes, "eclecticism signaled superficial and passive skill—a virtuosic ability to mimic the language of others without saying anything new."²²¹

²¹⁷ Howard Taubman, "Records: Barber Adagio," *New York Times*, November 1, 1942.

²¹⁸ Seymour Raven, "Horowitz Introduces Samuel Barber's New Sonata Brilliantly," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 31, 1950.

²¹⁹ Edward Sackville-West, "A Quarterly Retrospect: April–June 1951," *Gramophone*, (August 1951).

²²⁰ Franklin, *The Idea of Music*, 62.

²²¹ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 19.

Accusations of Eclecticism

Modernists were suspicious of middlebrows because they believed middlebrow traits such as eclecticism, synthesis, and compromise—that is, in which the styles associated with modernist music mingled with many other available options—detracted from “pure” modernism. Chowrimootoo notes that these traits were rarely attacked directly in critical reception; instead “a more common response among mid-century reviewers was to defend and prevaricate. They praised the works on terms that they thought most respectable, while ignoring, erasing, or sublimating aesthetic elephants in the room: sentimentality, romanticism, tonality, lyricism, spectacle ... Middlebrow ambivalence and duplicity are, in other words, a constant ‘absent presence.’”²²² As I have described in this chapter, ideological commitments surrounding cultural hierarchies informed the response to Barber’s music, even if the terms remained an implicit force shaping the discussion. However, Barber presents a compelling case study because those assessing his work explicitly invoked “eclecticism” in their critiques.

Some critics were ambivalent toward the supposed eclecticism and variety of Barber’s compositional style. In 1958, for example, a reviewer with *The Times* maintained that the varied nature of Barber’s opera *Vanessa* was complemented by its melodicism: “If the music is at times a little eclectic, it is always interesting and there are some very good tunes.”²²³ Other critics, however, believed this feature of Barber’s style was a severe deficiency. In a 1951 article for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Jerome Bohn reviewed several recordings of compositions by Barber, Darius Milhaud, and Alban Berg. Bohn considered the shifts and changes in Barber’s compositional to be a form of artistic insincerity rather than a natural musical development:

Listening to these works, all of them composed within a span of four years, is likely to be a rather unsettling experience and leads one to ask how many Samuel Barbers are there and which of them is the real Barber? Is his true medium that of the Cello

²²² Ibid., 20.

²²³ “Mr. S. Barber’s *Vanessa*,” *The Times*, January 17, 1958.

Concerto with its leanings toward American folk-idiom in the corner movements and romantic lyricism in the slow movement? In which is he sincerest: in the middle-of-the-road modernism of the Second Symphony or in the uncompromising dissonance of his 'Medea'; or is he, in the latest of these products, penned in 1947, 'Knoxville Summer of 1915,' turning still to other paths, perhaps those pursued by the pastoral-minded Vaughan Williams in order to find his true personality?²²⁴

After lambasting Barber's inability to settle upon a coherent compositional style, Bohn proceeded to assert that eclecticism diminishes a composer's work: "[Barber] had better make up his mind soon just which direction his music should take before he is permanently stamped with dubious imprint of indiscriminate eclecticism. He is too gifted and accomplished a composer to waste his time at this state of his career in futile experimentation."²²⁵ Such strident reactions to eclecticism must be understood within the context of modernism, which prioritize commitments of artistic purity and autonomy.²²⁶ Furthermore, perceptions of eclecticism and inconsistency were also tacitly associated with "crass calculation," a deference to the audience rather than a commitment to one's artistic vision. Figures such as Virgil Thomson would take up this critique, linking it to questions of class mobility in particular, and artistic mediation specifically.

Barber as High Middlebrow

In a 1981 interview with Peter Dickinson, Thomson implied that the financial and cultural success of Barber's early works discouraged him from developing his compositional style to its full potential. Thomson stated that "Everything [Barber] did was of the old-fashioned type. The question of fashion didn't impress him in the least. His earliest experiences as a composer—under twenty—were successful, and he had the sense to stay with what he'd been educated to do and what

²²⁴ Jerome Bohn, "Recent Records: Modern American and European Music Recorded on LP Disks," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 29, 1951.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 27.

he could do well.”²²⁷ However, Thomson did hold high praise for Barber’s concertos, believing these three pieces exemplified the artistic culture that Barber was raised and educated in:

I’ve heard the Cello Concerto, the Piano Concerto—both very successful concertos. And the violin one. Sam was not a string player, but he could learn things. And he had a good ear. And it somehow runs through that upper-middle-class family and the very high-class artistic situation of Louise Homer. He was brought up to believe in the highest standards of artistic integrity. He never wrote down to anybody ... the workmanship, being extremely careful, holds up in an extraordinary way.²²⁸

Thomson shaped his assessment in terms of socioeconomic class: in response to Dickinson’s observation that Barber was said to have written music he knew would be popular, Thomson replied “I think that [Barber’s] idea of a successful musical work—I mean artistically successful—was something that could be played not necessarily in the pop concerts but for the subscription public of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Now, that’s high middlebrow.”²²⁹ Thomson’s utilization of the “high middlebrow” designation illuminates certain dynamics in the reception to Barber more generally. Barber’s compositions could not be considered “highbrow” because they were insufficiently modern, namely, they are not serialist or overtly experimental in their approach. However, Thomson’s assertion that Barber “never wrote down to anyone” establishes his contention that Barber created music which was accessible and understandable to audiences while refusing to compromise his artistic standards. As Richard Taruskin notes, while highbrow and lowbrow were relatively stable categories, the middlebrow was “aspiring and mobile.”²³⁰ As Chowrimootoo and Guthrie note, middlebrow audiences “looked to culture for aesthetic education, social elevation, and spiritual education.”²³¹ For Thomson, Barber’s music aided in the realization of such aspirations, resulting in the “high middlebrow” designation.

²²⁷ Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 117.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

²³⁰ Taruskin, “Which Way is Up?,” 251.

²³¹ Chowrimootoo and Guthrie, “Colloquy,” 328.

Barber's status as a middlebrow composer was also explicitly discussed in critical reception outside the United States. In a 1952 review of Barber's *Prayers of Kierkegaard* for the *Musical Times*, Donald Mitchell asserted that

Barber's settings are of substantial length, continuous in design and solemnly conceived. The music is always deft and fluent, but lacks pungency and bite; it leaves an impression of a creatively unmotivated display of excellent craftsmanship. If Barber has a style at all, it belongs to the category of contemporary academicism, a kind of tasteful middlebrow modernity that may have a topical function but will not prove of much interest in the future.²³²

Barber's supposed failure to incorporate contemporary idioms—or “pungency and bite”—is again a source of contention. Mitchell's characterization, however, asserts that although Barber's style is appealing to audiences, it possesses temporary rather than historical relevance. In this way, Mitchell implicitly suggests that those who determine what music will be remembered in posterity are not the audiences who are receptive to the music, but the scholars and critics who proclaim judgments upon it. This assessment, like Thomson's, is influenced by modernist values, particularly a commitment to influence and posterity.

Barber himself understood that he lived during a time when “ideals of aesthetic purity reigned.”²³³ In a 1938 interview with the *Philadelphia Bulletin* Barber stated that

Skyscrapers, subways, and train lights play no part in the music I write. Neither am I at all concerned with the musical values inherent in geometric celebrations. My aim is to write good music that will be comprehensible to as many people as possible, instead of music heard only by small snobbish musical societies in the large cities. Radio makes this aim entirely possible of achievement. The universal basis of artistic spiritual communication by means of art is through the emotions.

In addition, this statement also suggests that Barber cared about the audience response to this music and was conscious of the artistic trends that valued esoterism and exclusivity at the expense of accessibility and communication to a mass audience. Furthermore, in a notable interaction between

²³² Donald Mitchell, “London Music,” *Musical Times*, (August 1955): 433.

²³³ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 2.

Allen Kozinn and Barber, Kozinn asks, “[A] sense of line along with traditional harmonic and melodic style have marked your work. Have you ever been tempted to explore some of the more avant-garde sonorities and styles?” To which Barber responded, “Ah, I was waiting for this! Do you mean, ‘why haven’t I changed?’ Why should I? There’s no reason music should be difficult for the audience, is there?”²³⁴ This is a highly significant comment, for Barber expresses skepticism toward the idea that complexity is the ultimate value, that music should be difficult, complex, and incomprehensible to an audience. Instead, Barber reaffirms his commitment to creating music which is accessible to audiences.

²³⁴ Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 51.

CODA

Although Barber's *Adagio for Strings* has remained a popular work in concert halls, conductors like Marin Alsop have argued that other pieces from his compositional output deserve to be performed more frequently.²³⁵ In 2010, for example, Alsop posited that "The archetypical Barber we know from the *Adagio* is a melodic, lyrical long-line composer. But that only captures one dimension of his work. Because he's also concise, angular, rhythmic, and witty."²³⁶ Regarding Barber as simply a neo-Romantic is too limiting, for it fails to contend with the polarized and contradictory nature of Barber's reception history during the twentieth century. As this document has sought to demonstrate, modernist values and twentieth century dichotomies have shaped the disconnect between the appearance of Barber compositions on concert settings and the degree to which Barber is analyzed in academic scholarship. Examining these dichotomies also illuminates the cultural landscape that Barber worked in, for the manner in which critics responded to Barber's music often reflected concerns their concerns pertaining to broader musical and cultural issues, such as musical nationalism and the trajectory of American art music.

Viewing Barber through a middlebrow framework, therefore, allows us to comprehend better how Barber was understood by his contemporaries. Furthermore, as Chowrimootoo has articulated, oppositional cultural categories were powerful forces in twentieth century cultural criticism, even if such terms were not explicitly invoked.²³⁷ Situating Barber within a middlebrow frame, therefore, provides a more nuanced rendering of Barber's place in the history of American art music, as well as demonstrate how these cultural hierarchies are more fraught than the discourse might suggest.

²³⁵ Joanna Keller, "An *Adagio* for Strings, and for the Ages," *New York Times*, March 7, 2010.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 19–20.

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