

Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*

The lush language of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* speaks directly to the listener in a profoundly soulful way. Scored for string ensemble, the approximately nine minute piece – give or take a little depending on the interpretation – represents the expansion of a very limited amount of musical material. The main melody, which essentially serves as the theme for a set of subtle variations throughout the work, is straightforward yet contains a wealth of emotional content. In it, Barber has created a gorgeous song-like – or more appropriately, chant-like – melody, which he sets with a wide spectrum of chords. The openness of the theme to such harmonization and the quasi-perpetual motion rhythms it contains give the composer a fertile source for his ultimate expression of longing, poignant striving, and, ultimately, acceptance.

The piece begins with a statement of that theme accompanied by long, velvety chords, establishing a mood of quiet nostalgia. While the melody rises in register, the chords swell as does the sense of longing Barber evokes through a skillful denial of harmonic resolution. The piece progresses in a series of such swells, flowing smoothly from the first iteration of the theme to the next and the next. As the music continues, Barber gradually moves away from the basic melody and accompaniment texture of the opening into more intricate settings where the different voices weave increasingly intense harmonies. The sustained chords of the opening eventually dissolve into a rich fabric of motion as the voices of the ensemble gradually rise to their highest registers, where the instruments sing with their greatest power. At the climax of this long-term ascension, the music reaches a frozen series of chords. The heart-wrenching music epitomizes the very human feeling of being completely filled with a pure desire, a longing so intense that it can never be fulfilled.

Ultimately, Barber's work expresses just that. The chords break off just as they reach a maximum of beauty and intensity, leaving behind only a silence that is jarring in the multiplicity of meanings it contains. Underneath the resounding emotional echoes of the unresolved climax, the music pulls itself back together with a quiet sense of renewal. The main theme appears in a final incarnation greatly resembling the opening, yet with quite a different tone. The desire-ridden harmonies that accompany the opening now take on a more austere quality. After the intense emotional journey of the piece, this coda seems to express a calm acceptance: the longing contained in the music is itself a resolution, rather than an uncertain element requiring external closure.