

## Violin Concerto SAMUEL BARBER

The origin of the composition of the Barber Violin Concerto has an unusual tale associated with it. It is gossipy, even snarky, and essentially fanciful or exaggerated. In its bare outlines the story goes like this: To promote his budding career as a violinist, the adopted son of a wealthy businessman commissioned fellow Curtis Institute graduate Samuel Barber to compose a violin concerto for his debut. The student didn't admire the quality of the Concerto, whose first two movements had been completed, especially as it didn't allow for virtuosic display. Barber protested and as a result, some sort of jury of faculty members of the Curtis Institute was convened to assess the Concerto as performed by another one of the Institute's students. They found that the Concerto was of high quality and that the objections of the commissioning violinist were so egregious that he should relinquish his claim to perform the première. The story often continues with the tale that Barber then, almost as a spiteful riposte, composed a finale to the concerto that was so virtuosic that the commissioning violinist didn't have the technique to perform it, so he not only relinquished the première, but never performed the piece that had been commissioned for him.

Here is the actual cast of characters involved in the commissioning and première, and a more factual account. The wealthy businessman was Philadelphia industrialist Samuel Simeon Fels (of Fels-Naphtha soap fame). He commissioned Barber to write a violin concerto for his ward, Iso Briselli, who, like Barber, had graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music in 1934.

Barber accepted Fels's commission and, with the advance, went to Switzerland to work on the concerto. Barber started working on the first two movements in Switzerland during the summer of 1939. He hoped to complete the concerto in the early fall to meet the October 1st deadline, so that Briselli could perform the *Concerto* for his upcoming debut with the Philadelphia Orchestra. But WWII disrupted all plans and Barber subsequently returned to the US to continue his work on the concerto.

In Barber's account, he gave Briselli "the completed first two movements (about 15 minutes of music)" in "the middle of October" and "he seemed disappointed that they were not of virtuoso character--a bit too easy." (Briselli, however, has stated that he did like the first two movements.)

In mid-November, Briselli showed the two completed movements to his violin coach in New York City, Albert Meiff. If there is a "villain" in this tale, it is Meiff who caustically criticized the work, even writing to Fels about its lacking the requirements for Briselli to make a brilliant debut which, logically enough, was the coach's great concern.

Having finished the piece, Barber arranged a performance of the virtuosic, perpetual motion third movement by a Curtis student Herbert Baumel who joined Barber in pianist Josef Hofmann's studio (with no jury). This performance assured Barber that the piece was performable. Barber sent the violin part to Briselli about two months before the intended première. However, Briselli was disappointed when he received the third movement from Barber; according to Barber, his reasons were that: "1) he could not safely learn it for January; 2) it was not violinistic; and 3) it did not suit musically the other two movements, it seemed to him rather inconsequential." They couldn't come to an agreement – Barber saw no need for any revisions -- leading Briselli to give up his claim on the *Concerto*. On the dates for the intended première performances with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, Briselli substituted Dvořák's *Violin Concerto* -- which should put to rest the myth that he was a spoiled, substandard violinist.

The first performance of the *Concerto* was in 1940 by Baumel with the Curtis Institute Orchestra

under Fritz Reiner. Following this performance, in February 1941 Eugene Ormandy led its official premiere in a pair of performances by Albert Spalding with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Subsequent performances by many violinists, including a 1964 recording by Issac Stern with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under Leonard Bernstein, established the *Concerto* in the standard concert repertoire – as few 20<sup>th</sup> century pieces have. I don't have the numbers to back this, but I would wager that the Barber *Violin Concerto* has become so beloved in the US that its performances here easily exceed those of the Dvořák *Violin Concerto*, as wonderful as that piece is.

The *Concerto* is in three movements. Barber provided these program notes for the premiere performance:

The first movement—*allegro molto moderato* [only moderately fast] —begins with a lyrical first subject announced at once by the solo violin, without any orchestral introduction. This movement as a whole has perhaps more the character of a sonata than concerto form. The second movement—*andante sostenuto*— [a moderate tempo] is introduced by an extended oboe solo. The violin enters with a contrasting and rhapsodic theme, after which it repeats the oboe melody of the beginning. The last movement, a *perpetuum mobile*, exploits the more brilliant and virtuosic character of the violin.

- *IPO Board Member Charles Amenta M.D.*