

## Musical Treasure Chest #52

A recent conversation with William Gray (musician extraordinaire and conductor of Burnt Hills Oratorio Society) about **Samuel Barber** and his setting of Matthew Arnold's poem "**Dover Beach**" prompted me to revisit this riveting piece. This song setting is a work I have had a chance to perform several times over my musical career. Each time I am completely captivated by the effectiveness of Barber's writing; the darkness of its creative core, and its wonderful aural panorama.

"Dover Beach" was written by English poet Matthew Arnold, one of the great Victorian poets. Though not published until 1867 in a collection titled *New Poems*, it is probable that the poem dates to 1851, when Arnold was on his honeymoon in Dover, England. The narrator could possibly be speaking to his bride. In four stanzas and so evocatively descriptive and lyrical, the poem is familiar to many and often used in contemporary culture from Ray Bradbury and James Heller to PD James and Ian McEwan. Some of its phrases: "ignorant armies clash by night" and "darkling plain" are etched in our modern lexicon. I include the entire poem so that its marvelous and quite musical verses can draw you into its magic.

Samuel Barber, whose aunt was the well-respected singer Louise Homer and who himself was a fine baritone, composed many songs (the largest genre of his output), some as standalone works, and others as part of cycles (such as the "Hermit Songs" from 1953). He was at his best writing for the voice and his songs remain an important part of the contemporary vocal canon. And, of course, he wrote two operas premiered at the Met (*Vanessa* and *Antony and Cleopatra*) as well as the glorious *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* for soprano and orchestra. A prodigiously talented musician, Barber attended the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia (beginning at the age of 14), studying piano, voice and composition. He initially pursued a career as a professional singer, before transitioning to composition. "Dover Beach," which dates from 1931 (the same year as the orchestral overture *School for Scandal*, which won the Beurns Prize for Composition and was performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra shortly after), is an

amazing setting of the poem. You will immediately hear the undulation of the ocean waves in the second violin part, while the first violin plays a plaintive, simple melody. The narrative of the poem unfolds from there. Barber was the baritone on the first recording, which was made in 1937, with the Curtis String Quartet. He described the work as a true piece of chamber music, with all the parts of equal importance. And Vaughan Williams hearing a performance of the piece while he was in America in 1932 told Barber that he had gotten it "just right."

I suggest you read (or refamiliarize yourself) with the poem first, then listen to how Barber translates and supports the poem musically. Absolutely brilliant and gripping. I have given you two recordings: Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (with the text and images) and then the 1937 recording with Barber.

The sea is calm tonight.  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!  
Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanchèd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

## The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmO7qX0-qu4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjPtPmshqIA>