

ESSAY FOR ORCHESTRA NO.2, OP. 17
by SAMUEL BARBER

(Born March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania;
died January 23, 1981, in New York)

Not only was Barber one of the most well-known and most frequently-performed contemporary composers in this country, but he had a considerable international reputation as well. Moreover, he achieved this success by writing music in a warmly lyrical, neo-romantic style, and in traditional musical forms. But he was not in any way a reactionary. His music is indeed "modern" and is peppered with pungent dissonances and rhythmic complexities; however, melody still remains one of its essential elements. Barber's output as a composer was not exceptionally large, and in many instances there is only one work composed in each of the various musical forms; but, for the most part, they are all highly refined, polished works which give every indication of becoming permanent fixtures of the highly unstable modern repertory.

Barber was totally American-trained and was graduated in 1926 from the Curtis Institute of Music where he had studied piano, voice and composition. In the late twenties and early thirties he was the recipient of several awards and grants which enabled him to study abroad. While visiting Italy in 1935, he had the opportunity to meet Arturo Toscanini, who was favorably impressed with the young composer. During the next thirty years, Barber successfully premiered new works almost yearly and he quickly rose to the forefront of contemporary American composers. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his Piano Concerto in 1963. His only real failure was his second opera, Antony and Cleopatra, which was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera for the opening of its new theater in New York's Lincoln Center in 1966.

Despite the lavish production which included staging by Franco Zeffereilli, the opera was dropped from the repertory at the end of the season. The opera's failure had a profoundly adverse effect on the composer. Long periods of inactivity followed and there were indications of a slight lessening of his creative powers. He started to age rapidly, his health began to fail, and he died after a long battle with cancer.

The essay for orchestra was a musical form unique to Barber and he composed three such works. In them he attempted to transform the elements and style of the literary essay into purely musical forms by presenting a series of musical subjects, developing, amplifying, and correlating them, and ultimately bringing them to a conclusion. The Second Essay for Orchestra was completed in 1942 and was given its first performance by Bruno Walter and the New York Philharmonic later the same year. Its opening section introduces three musical subjects: the first presented by the solo flute, then later taken up by the clarinet and oboe; the second played by the strings; and the third played by the brass. A loud, sharp chord introduces the development section in which the brass theme is treated fugally and carried to a climax. The final section combines elements of the first and third themes.

-Kenneth C. Viant