

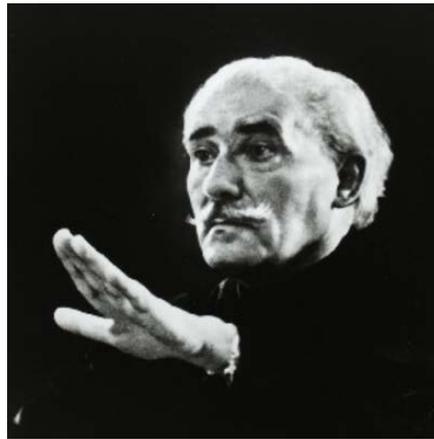
“Adagio for Strings”--Arturo Toscanini, conductor; NBC Symphony (November 5, 1938)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Samuel Barber



Arturo Toscanini

An “adagio” is a musical marking noting that a composition should be played slowly. Perhaps the most famous modern work ever written in adagio style is “Adagio for Strings,” a work by Samuel Barber. Created from the composer’s own 1936 String Quartet No. 1, Op. 11, “Adagio” had its world premiere on November 5, 1938 over NBC Radio and was conducted by the great Arturo Toscanini. Since its debut, the work has become one of the most cherished, moving and resurrected musical works in American history. “Adagio” has become, in the words of one, the nation’s “funeral music” due to its frequent performance during times of national mourning, for example in the days following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The performance of “Adagio” over NBC Radio was not, in today’s vernacular, a “special event.” It was just another broadcast of “NBC Symphony Orchestra,” a weekly program of RCA chief’s David Sarnoff’s high-brow and most successful effort to give classical music a major platform over the American airwaves. Remarkably, “Symphony,” as a series, was not alone. On radio at various times during the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s were such series as “The Voice of Firestone” on NBC and later ABC; “The New York Philharmonic” on CBS; “The Bell Telephone Hour” on NBC; and “Music Appreciation Hour” over NBC Blue.

Even amongst this prestigious lot, “NBC Symphony” held a major cachet, if only due to the presence of Toscanini, the then living symbol and embodiment of classical music in America, a position solidified by his 1939 appearance on the cover of “Life” magazine.

Toscanini was brought (and bought) out of his quiet Italian retirement in 1937 thanks to the largess of Sarnoff who coaxed the conductor back to the podium for 10 live broadcasts at a salary of \$40,000 tax-free American dollars. Along with his salary, Toscanini was also promised his choice of repertoire, no commercial interruptions and the best musicians money could buy. As author Thomas A. DeLong has noted, “never before or since has a radio network or corporate entity created an orchestra of this caliber or size.”

With Arthur Rodzinski hired as assistant conductor and NBC’s Studio 8-H (now the home of TV’s “Saturday Night Live”) in Rockefeller Center outfitted for the endeavor, “NBC Symphony” debuted on November 13, 1937. The first few broadcasts were lead by other conductors; Toscanini made his debut on Christmas Eve, 1937. His inaugural broadcast featured works by Vivaldi, Mozart, and Brahms.

From “Symphony’s” first broadcast, superlatives and large audiences poured in. Over 1,000 people regularly attended each live broadcast and scalpers supposedly made bank with bootleg tickets. The network reaped accolades and even looked the other way when the program occasionally ran long; “Radio Guide” magazine once noted, “Toscanini and President Roosevelt are the two people who can run long or short without being cut off by the network.”

In the end, Toscanini would stay with the program until 1954, a total of 17 seasons. He finally called it quits at the age of 87. (He died in 1957.)

While the majority of the orchestra’s repertoire was based on vetted, time-honored pieces by classic (and European) composers, Toscanini was not completely adverse to new works. This is how Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings” came to him.

Samuel Osborne Barber II (1910-1981) was born in Pennsylvania and from a young age decided to devote his life to music. He was educated at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and was a prolific composer. While still in his 20s, he composed for the likes of Leontyne Price, Vladimir Horowitz and John Browning. He would win two Pulitzer Prizes for his work: for “Vanessa” in 1957 and for a piano concerto in 1962.

In January 1938, Barber submitted his composition “Adagio for Strings” to Toscanini. Shortly thereafter, Barber found it returned to him, supposedly to his great annoyance. Later, though, Toscanini sent word through a friend that he did plan to perform the piece; he simply returned it because he had already memorized it.

As noted, “Adagio for Strings” was premiered by the NBC Symphony Orchestra on the broadcast of November 5, 1938. At the end of the first rehearsal of the piece, Toscanini is rumored to have said, “Semplice e bella” (“Simple and beautiful”). As such, “Adagio” stood in deep contrast to much of the conductor’s more typically dramatic and intense repertoire.

Since its premiere, “Adagio” has been compared to a religious experience, or a mass (though the work clocks in at only nine minutes). More than once it has been said to sound like Bach at his most sacred. “Adagio” is a delicate, lyrical and gentle piece, performed without excess or ornamentation. Barber biographer Barbara B. Heyman has said of it, “It’s a precise piece, emotionally. It begins...it makes its point and then goes away. There’s a kind of sadness and poetry about it. It has a melodic gesture that reaches an arc, like a sigh and an exhale.” Author Thomas Larson, who deconstructed the work and its history for a 2010 book, was even more blunt, titling his tome “The Saddest Music Ever Written.”

Along with its utilization at funerals and national remembrances, this sad music has also been sampled to great effect in a variety of film and television programs, fictional and non. For example, it can be heard in “The Elephant Man” and in Oliver Stone’s “Platoon.”

The appeal of such a stately and mournful work as “Adagio” to Toscanini and the world at the time can be assessed a number of ways. By 1938, the Great Depression was still wearing on and Europe was moving closer to war. From the early 1930’s, from his home in Italy, Toscanini was vocally anti-Hitler and anti-Mussolini. His stand against fascism once resulted in his being beaten. Later, his Italian passport was revoked. By 1938, the severe state of his home country and death or disappearance of many of the Jewish musicians he had once worked with weighed heavily on him. Toscanini’s grief and concern was easily channeled into his work, especially Barber’s languid piece which many viewed as an ad hoc moral mission for the conductor.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and

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