

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

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Essay by Barbara Heyman (guest post)*



Samuel Barber, composer

Like so many of his contemporaries, Barber’s imagination was captured by the legendary Italian conductor, Arturo Toscanini. In early spring of 1933, he wrote to Sidney Homer of his ecstatic reaction to hearing Toscanini conduct Beethoven. Homer responded from a perspective shared by Americans raised in the European tradition:

Yes, I too have been to Heaven with Toscanini and Beethoven. This surge of greatness has set America thinking deeply. Something new is born in our country--more power to it! When Toscanini first came to the Philharmonic, after the Ninth Symphony, when Aunt Louise sang with him, I told him I thought he would be a Messiah to American musical life and I think I was right. The fight is one of greatness and true music against silliness, boorishness, and vacuity. It is a one-sided fight but it must have leaders! You can supply some of the ammunition!

Fortified with Homer’s advice and buoyed with the news that his first orchestral piece, the Overture to “The School for Scandal,” had been warmly received in Philadelphia, in August 1933, Barber, with Menotti visited Toscanini on Isola di San Giovanni, one of the four islands in Lago Maggiore. The Toscanini villa, atop a cliff and built around an old church of the Principe Borromeo, was surrounded by exquisite gardens, “all around, the waves of Maggiore lapping at the foot of the island’s cliffs--and tiny lights on all the distant mountains.” Barber described this initial contact with the conductor in a lengthy, detailed letter to his parents:

It is the most romantic place you could imagine...they have the whole island to themselves, and their villa is up on the crest of the rocks; all around are great trees and gardens, which are arranged in the most natural way so that no gardener seems to have laid foot there. The house is white with rose-colored awnings, and

stretching away from it on all sides is the blue lake with the purple mountains in the distance....

We got out of our boat and trembled up the footpath to the house, not having the slightest idea whether they would receive us or not, for we had not written or phoned that we were coming. We asked if Mme Toscanini was at home, saying we were friends of Max Smith; and then a *long* nervewracking wait, while the servant seemed to be hunting in the garden for her and our hearts sank; and then he returned saying, "*Madame* Toscanini is too busy to see you now, but the Maestro is coming to receive you." My heart still beats faster at the thought! Soon he appeared, coming up the path with Zirato, the manager of the Philharmonic [then assistant manager, later manager of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Society], and greeted us. He was the nicest thing you could imagine, took us around to a terrace with a heavenly view, and there we sat and talked.... Our wildest thoughts were that we would have a formal, brief visit, but here he was telling us how glad he was we came, and treating us like old friends.... He spoke in glowing terms of Aunt Louise's "Orfeo".... After a while his two daughters arrived...and we made a tour of the island, up and down through the gardens. Much of the time I was walking alone with him, tickled as a cat. Back at the house he took G-C and me into his studio and showed us some of his treasures—the last thing Wagner wrote, never published, a most beautiful couple of lines for the piano which he stuck in the score of "Parsifal" when he gave it to his wife on completion. Frau Wagner gave it to Toscanini, and he played it for us.... He has a portrait of Beethoven in his youth, the only one in the world. He picked up two volumes which he said he was never without--Beethoven's string quartets. (Owing to his extreme myopia, the poor Maestro did not realize that one of the cherished volumes he was showing us happened to be an "English Grammar Simplified for Beginners.") Then ...we had tea and talked some more, and left in a daze of enthusiasm for him and his house.

More visits followed, for Toscanini went out of his way to be hospitable to the two young composers. He usually sent his motor boat to bring them to his house for dinner or tea, and inevitably the evenings ended in music:

Once, after dinner we went through Monteverdi's "Orfeo." I had never known this Renaissance opera before, with its amazing contemporaneousness. Toscanini played...and sang Eurydice...full of feeling. I sang Orfeo and was in the Seventh Heaven of delight. The wonderful lament—Tu sei morta.... Afterwards we sat on the terrace and talked half the night. Wagner's oldest daughter, Liszt's granddaughter...was there.

About this time, Toscanini told Barber he would like to perform one of his works. This was a groundbreaking invitation; Toscanini, who was famous for his avoidance of contemporary international composers (Bartók, Berg, and Schoenberg, for example), up until the early 1940s had all but completely neglected music by American composers; rare exceptions were Howard Hanson's Symphony No. 2 (which he conducted in 1933) and two works by Abram Chasins.

Learning of his nephew's good fortune, Homer communicated his enthusiasm and compassion in a lengthy letter that must have indeed been a source of inspiration and encouragement to the young composer:

It all sounds too good to be true, and you have it because you earned it and deserve it, and that's the best part of it! The thing now is to write something for Toscanini that expresses the depth and sincerity of your nature, and perhaps your gratitude at being able to live and work. You know as well as I do that the Maestro loves sincere straight-forward stuff, with genuine feeling in it and no artificial pretense and padding. It ought to be an inspiration to you to know a man like that.

So often we begin to compose in a spirit of fearfulness. We are fearful of our listener. Will he understand? Will he be impressed? Will he be moved? Must I dazzle him, or write down to his comprehension?

This consciousness of listener, publisher, or conductor can be a real impediment to profound, spontaneous work. I am sure you will agree with me.... Sometimes meeting a really great man can release much power in a man's soul. Think what Joachim and Schumann meant to the young Brahms, at just your age. In the same way Toscanini may mean much to you, if you keep his simplicity and real responsiveness clearly in your mind.

The very distractions of the ideal way in which you are living will make it hard for you to compose. (Sounds Irish!) Try to concentrate on your composing and set aside certain hours when you are accessible to no one. The subconscious fear of interruption and the sense of limited time are both nuisances. The technique of overcoming all obstacles is one of the distinguishing marks of all the great composers, and they had plenty! I don't mean that hot-house conditions are necessary, but a certain freedom and repose are.... Your work will depend, in a measure, on the men you know, on the taste and perception you encounter, on your own selection of influence.

More than three years passed before Barber produced a work for Toscanini that he felt was worthy of the conductor's attention. At the Salzburg festival in 1937, as principal conductor, Toscanini had heard Rodzinski conduct Barber's Symphony in One Movement. At this time, he was thinking about including a work by an American composer on his winter programs for the newly formed National Broadcasting Company Symphony Orchestra created especially for him. Rodzinski strongly urged that he play something by Barber, whose traditionally-styled music could hardly have seemed heretical to the conservative conductor, and Toscanini therefore showed renewed interest in seeing a new short piece.

In late August 1937, Artur Rodzinski and Royal (of NBC) asked Barber to write a ten-minute piece for Toscanini for his American concerts. Barber wrote about this event to Mary Bok, on September 21 from Jägerhaus, the game-warden's house in Wolfgang:

Toscanini seems willing to play an American piece and asked them what I was composing. It must be ready by December, and this news is strictly between us, as Ormandy thinks I am composing for him. Obviously I will do my best, but the immediate result of this was to throw my brain into a state of complete emptiness.

As a distraction, Menotti encouraged him to go to Venice for a “grand week at a house-party there.” Barber was one of only two Americans:

A Baroness Bunde was the hostess; we lived in three connecting palazzo on a small canal and ate in an inside garden under two yew trees....and as we were all the same age, we had a most gay time. It was just what I needed.

The modern music festival was in sway, and I met many friends from Rome. Princess Barsiano gave a tea for me at Florian’s so I met Markevitch, Rieti, Princess Polignac (rather fierce) and other composers en masse. I went with Stravinsky to see the Tintoretto Exposition. Also had a rather glamorous social-week.... And oh, yes! Who should come to our compagna on the Lido, with whom I had a ten-minute chat, than, emotion suprême, Marlene Dietrich!!

At the end of January 1938, Barber wrote to Cole that he was “rushing--day and night--to finish an orchestra piece,” which was probably the “Essay” he presented to Toscanini during late spring of that year. Dedicated to C. E. (Carl Engel), this work inspired Sidney Homer to write to his nephew: “You have no idea how many people look to you for guidance in refinement, taste, and poetic insight.... It is a responsibility and you will have to live up to it. The longing for the highest must be satisfied.”

Robert Horan, the brilliant poet who befriended Menotti and Barber in the early forties and lived with them at Capricorn, believed that Barber had for some time felt the necessity for a short orchestrated form, abstract rather than descriptive in character, a form that would correspond in length and organization to the literary essay. It was Barber’s intention, Horan said, “to avoid that overworked department of modern composition, the three-part form, by fashioning...a subtle two-part form, in the two sections of which, although completely contrasting in mood and color, there is reciprocal interplay of thematic material.”

[...]

In January 1938, Barber and Menotti were happily living in the Water Tank at 8 East 79th Street in Manhattan. In response to gifts sent to them by Mary Bok--including personalized engraved stationery, books, and money toward their living expenses--Barber wrote,

Thank you for all the gifts, the check included, which may go for a complete set of Melville, if I have the audacity. And I loved K. Mansfield, some of which I have never read, and I think how happy I am to be here, for two years ago at the time I was reading her letters on the Riviera--in a very melancholy state, indeed....

Toscanini has not behaved so well. After definitely promising an appointment, he would never actually fix one, so I had to give up playing the piece for him, which would have been better, and sent him the score yesterday....

With his "Essay," Barber also sent to Toscanini the "Adagio for Strings," a five-part arrangement of the second movement of his String Quartet in B minor. Several weeks passed with no word from Toscanini. Barber wrote again to Mary Bok on 21 January 1938:

Your letter about the quartet arrived just at the right moment and I hung on to it tightly for several days--days which I should now like to forget. The Toscanini piece has made the last month a bit difficult. As you know, he promised to hear the piece and I waited from day to day from Xmas on for an appointment. The Rodzinski's left, Chotzinoff was evasive, everyone who could have helped didn't, and to make a long story short, I have never been able to see Toscanini. Signora T. always very cordial on the phone, but I could not fix a date and was forced to send the score. Two more weeks of waiting and finally G.C. saw T. for a long conversation at the Pereras. T. said he was much interested in me but that my music was "all head and no heart," that the orchestration of the symphony was too heavy, fine technique but nothing more." "But have you looked at the new piece?," asked G.C. (I had sent the adagio movement of the string quartet arranged for string orchestra along with the new piece ["Essay"].) T. elusively repeated the same thing about "all mind and no heart." Signora Toscanini, however, said: "We are both so interested in your careers—I am sorry Maestro will not do Barber's piece, but Chotzinoff told us that Barber's music is all mind and no heart, etc. etc. whereas yours is flowing with melody like Bellini." In short, T. is becoming lazy and susceptible and has let Chotzinoff's opinion of my symphony deter him from carefully looking at the new piece--which neither he nor Chotzinoff have looked at, I think. It is such a shame, as T. is so well-disposed toward me, and if anyone had been around to root for me (the Rodzinski's, for instance) to counteract the other influences and let me play the new piece for him and convince him there is emotional substance--it would have been a different story. Would that Rodzinski had never started all this! But the piece is done, and I have offered it to our friend Ormandy. Better not mention this to anyone and of course not a word to Chotzinoff!

Shortly before he departed for Italy for the summer, Toscanini returned the scores to Barber without comment. Although Barber had intended to visit the conductor at his home later that summer, he was so "annoyed" by Toscanini's lack of response to his works that he sent Menotti on without him. The composer later reported an interchange that presumably occurred between Menotti and Toscanini while Barber sat in Pallanza waiting for the boat to come back:

At the end Toscanini said to Menotti, "Well, where's your friend Barber?" "Well, he's not feeling very well," said Gian Carlo. And Toscanini said, "I don't believe that. He's mad at me. Tell him not to be mad. I'm not going to play one of his pieces, I'm going to play both."

The extremely good news that Toscanini had decided to present “Essay” and “Adagio for Strings” was a major triumph for Barber. It was reported that the conductor had committed the scores to memory and did not look at them again until the day before the performance. At the last rehearsal on the day of the broadcast, Toscanini decided that the ending of “Essay” would be “improved” by the addition of a trumpet to reinforce the strings near the end. His frantic attempts to reach Barber by telephone to secure permission to make the change were unsuccessful. So confident was he of the validity of his alteration that, at the performance, the septuagenarian conductor incorporated the trumpet part anyway, afterwards apologizing to Barber for “taking liberties with his score.” Toscanini’s suggestion was not retained in the published score of “Essay.” A holograph at the Library of Congress with notes added in Toscanini’s hand suggests that he also tampered with the “Adagio for Strings” at measures 31–32.

Toscanini’s broadcasts were generally regarded with almost religious reverence, but the ten o’clock broadcast on the evening of 5 November 1938 held additional significance, for it marked recognition by the Italian conductor that there was enough merit in works by an American composer to bring them to the attention of a national audience. Curtis Institute considered the occasion so important that an entire script of the broadcast was printed in the newsletter “Overtones.” A review by Olin Downes gives attention to the ritual aspects of the broadcast as well as the beauty of Barber’s music:

The audience assembled last night...with the same eagerness, and listened and applauded with the same intensity which is customary at this series of events. There was the same almost laughable silence and solemnity as the orchestra ceased tuning and the gathering waited for seconds for the conductor to step silently through the door that opens on the stage. And there was the same highly privileged sensation of listening to performances which had almost the clarity and purity of chamber music, and finally, of hearing some interesting new scores....

...It goes without saying that Toscanini conducted the scores as if his reputation rested upon the results. He does that with whatever he undertakes. Mr. Barber had reason for thankfulness for a premiere under such leadership. And the music proved eminently worth playing. The Adagio...is not pretentious music. Its author does not pose and posture in his score. He writes with a definite purpose, a clear objective and a sense of structure....

A long line, in the “Adagio,” is well sustained. There is an arch of melody and form. The composition is most simple at the climaxes when it develops that the simplest chord or figure is the one most significant.... This is the product of a musically creative nature...who leaves nothing undone to achieve something as perfect in mass and detail as his craftsmanship permits.

Barber was astute enough to appreciate his good fortune, and he never forgot that performance, which he felt far surpassed the commercial recording made of the “Adagio” in Carnegie Hall in 1942.

To me the Carnegie recording seems to have less surge of powerful crescendo, as Toscanini had to repeat it several times in order to get the crescendo on one side of a 78-record.... [Then, playing the NBC radio broadcast of the premiere] Listen to the violas here.... Imagine! Primrose was the first violist then, and Alfred Wallenstein was the principal cellist. Wallenstein has always said to me that he felt this was one of Toscanini's greatest performances. What luck for a young composer to have such a first performance!

Barbara Heyman is the author of "Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music," from which the above is excerpted.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.