

# 'I hear America singing'

Samuel Barber and William Schuman are both known primarily for their orchestral works, yet their choral repertoire remains largely neglected.

A hundred years after their birth, David Wordsworth finds some forgotten treasures in their output

The earthy Walt Whitman poem *I hear America singing*, written ten years before the birth of Samuel Barber and William Schuman, could have been a signature tune for both US composers, embracing as it does shades of early 20th-century realism while adhering to a rootedness in romantic sensibilities. Both composers were eventually to become respected figures of the American musical establishment before seeing their reputations decline at a time when the musical ideals they held close seemed to be forgotten; and both wrote a considerable amount of very good choral music that deserves to be much better known.

But the backgrounds and musical education of these two composers born within months of each other could not have been more different. Barber was born to an 'all-American' middle-class, musically

highly literate family who encouraged the precocious young Sam to enter the Curtis Institute at 14 years of age. Schuman, on the other hand, came from a family of less than well-off German-American Jews and grew up with a love of popular music. The teenage Billy Schuman had a successful musical partnership with Frank Loesser (who later achieved fame as the composer of *Guys & Dolls*) but didn't even hear a professional orchestra until he was 20.

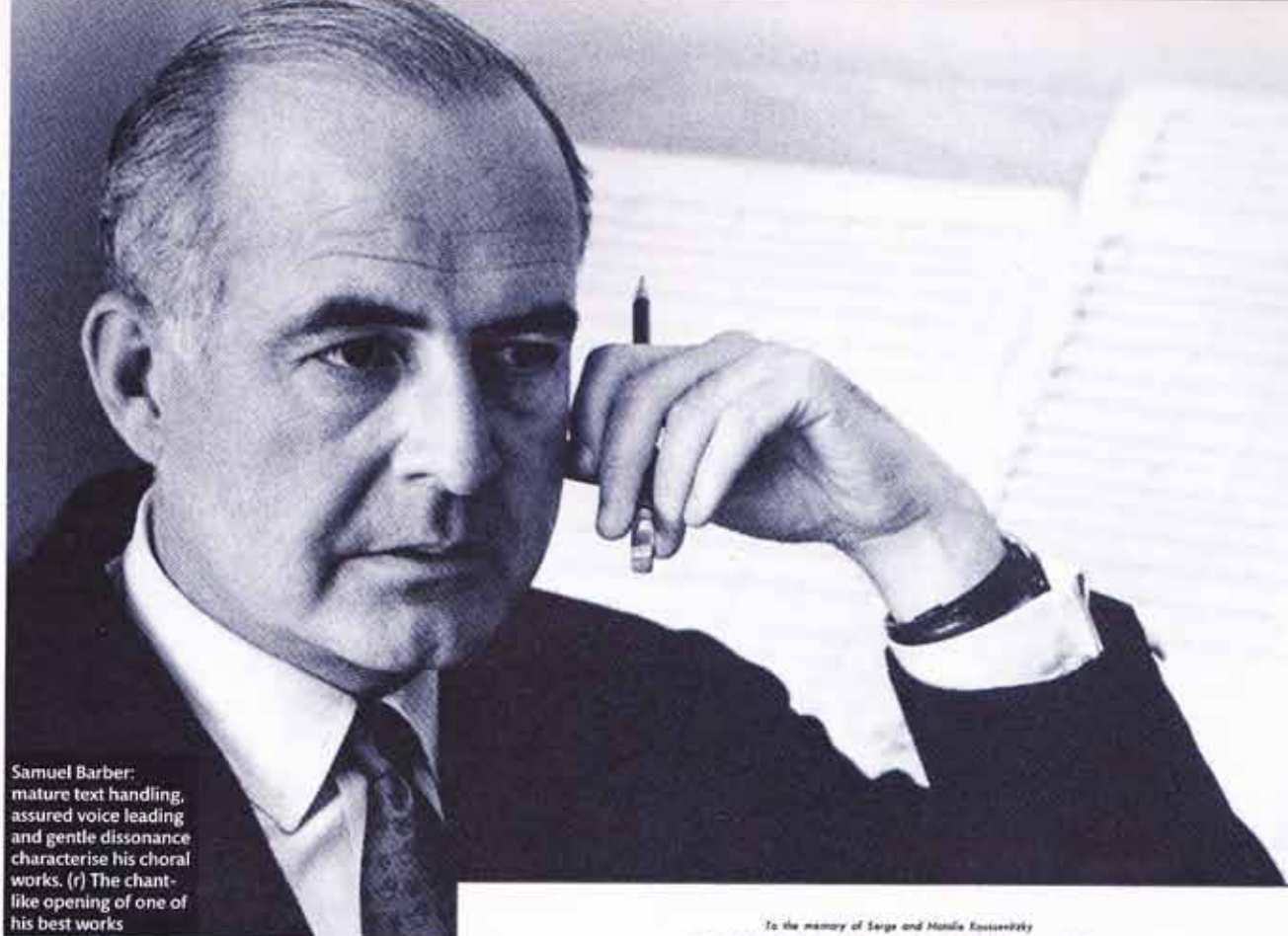
**'When I'm writing music for words, I immerse myself in those words and then let the music flow out of them'**

(Samuel Barber)

It was perhaps inevitable that being a fine baritone himself, Barber should turn to choral music on a reasonably regular

basis. European in outlook and widely read in several languages, it was mostly to non-American writers that he turned for his texts: Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, Joyce, Neruda, Yeats, Rilke among many others. In 1938 Barber was urged to form a Madrigal Chorus at the Curtis Institute and for them he wrote a number of his early choral works. He later recalled, 'At first I was frightened of them... until I saw they were afraid of me and this put me in a splendid humour' – perhaps a lesson to all aspiring choral directors? From this period come the women's chorus piece *The Virgin Martyrs* (1935) and *Let down the bars, O death* (1936) for mixed chorus, both of which show an astonishing maturity in the handling of text, assured voice leading, and which highlight the gentle dissonance that was to become so much a Barber fingerprint. *A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map* (1940), an impressive and for Barber surprisingly politically aware setting of a poem by Stephen Spender about the death of a soldier in the Spanish civil war, followed around the same time. The chorus in this work is supported by a set of timpani, which underline the rather dramatic and sinister poem with mysterious glissandi, adding to the already challenging choral writing. The published score suggests that the drums may be doubled by a piano in octaves, which certainly helps; and the composer later made a version that added brass





Samuel Barber: mature text handling, assured voice leading and gentle dissonance characterise his choral works. (r) The chant-like opening of one of his best works

instruments. As with several of his works, Barber made versions for both mixed and male voices. More straightforward are *Reincarnations* (1937–40), a set of three short pieces with dancing rhythms clearly inspired by the composer's love of the Italian madrigalists; and a spacious, impassioned setting of Gerard Manley Hopkins' *God's Grandeur*.

### Choral arrangements

The late 1930s also saw the composition of the work that Barber later came to regard as a weight around his neck, the *Adagio for Strings*. This was originally the slow movement of his String Quartet and subsequently became the unofficial American Anthem of Mourning. The composer himself made a choral version in 1967 – according to his friend Gian Carlo Menotti, just to make money! It may well be true, but this version is a demanding test for all but the most accomplished choirs. The slow tempo, extremes of dynamic and pitch and slowly expanding lines make this popular piece a big challenge; but when sung well, it does at least illustrate the work's debt to the early polyphonic composers in a way that the instrumental versions do not. Barber was shrewd enough to make choral

To the memory of Serge and Maria Koussevitzky

## PRAYERS OF KIERKEGAARD

For Mixed Chorus, Soprano Solo and Orchestra  
With Incidental Tenor Solo, Alto Solo Ad Libitum

Text from Søren Kierkegaard Samuel Barber, Op. 30

Grave and remote, 4-36

**Male Chorus** *a cappella*

O Thou who art in - change-a-ble, when nothing changes, May we find our rest and re-

**Male Soprano**

main of rest in - thee in - chang-ing. Thou art moved and moved in in-finite. Now by ad libitum the

**Male Chorus**

nead of a spin-ning. It - is this moves thee and that we scarce-ly see, it - hu-man sigh.

arrangements of several of his most popular solo songs, which are much more gratefully conceived for the voice. *Sure on this Shining Night* is perhaps the best known of these, with its characteristically long, lyrical, melodic lines; but also notable are *A Nun takes the Veil* (again setting Hopkins) and the irresistible *The Monk and his Cat*, in which the padding and pouncing of the monk's feline friend is wittily reproduced in the piano accompaniment.

### Power and passion

Barber had originally been commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky to write a large-scale work for soprano, chorus and orchestra in the early 1940s; but it was only after deciding to read again the writings of the 19th-century Danish philosopher

and theologian Søren Kierkegaard that he felt compelled to put pen to paper. Kierkegaard's writings advocating man's religious relationship with God clearly touched a nerve with Barber, who produced music of great power and passion. Although lasting under 20 minutes, *Prayers of Kierkegaard* moves through several different moods, from the chant-like opening for male voices, through a glorious soprano solo (written for Leontyne Price), a wonderful choral affirmation and finally to a strikingly savage orchestral interlude leading to a broad chorale. It should surely be counted as one of the composer's best works, is hugely uplifting to sing and its continued neglect is bewildering, whether in the original version or in Lee Hoiby's slightly reduced orchestration. >



William Schuman demonstrated a gift for ingenious choral textures

ERIC JOHNSON/REUTERS

**'I believe American artists have been a complete success. They have been as diverse as the democracy that gave them birth, and their achievements have found world acceptance'**  
(William Schuman)

Like Barber, some of Schuman's first significant performing experience came as a choral conductor. Forming a chorus at the rather less grand Sarah Lawrence College, a women's educational establishment just outside New York City, Schuman wrote several of his most significant early works for them, which he later re-arranged for mixed voices. Schuman's outlook was more overtly American, searching out texts that underline something of the American spirit, what we now perhaps call the 'American Dream'. Among Schuman's favoured writers were Langston Hughes, Richard Wilbur and Edna St Vincent Millay; but more often than not he turned to the poems of Walt Whitman. The great visionary writer's 'free verse' style appealed to Schuman's similarly inspired free-spirited rhythmic sense and fervent patriotism. On some occasions, not least in the *Secular Cantata no.2 A Free*

*Song* (1942, and which the following year won the first ever Pulitzer Prize for Music), this led to works of what might now be regarded as an overtly bombastic nature, but also resulted in arguably Schuman's choral masterpiece, *Carols of Death* (1958). Less mournful than the title suggests, the texts for this trilogy speak of a soothing departure from this life; in setting them, Schuman demonstrated a gift for ingenious choral textures and a refreshing approach to techniques of writing for both amateurs and professionals. The composer returned to Whitman as late as 1982 with his choral suite *Perceptions*, a late work that still shows a delight in discovering new and imaginative ways to write choral music.

### Wit and beauty

Schuman's orchestral works, not least the ten symphonies, are full of vigorous counterpoint, dynamic tension, a huge range of instrumental colour and a sometimes monolithic power, whereas his choral music brings out his wit and lightness of touch. *Mail Order Madrigals* (1971) extol the varying quality of goods in the 1987 Sears Roebuck Catalogue to gullible female consumers, whereas Schuman recreates every choral director's nightmare by composing a witty collection of pieces setting words all beginning with the letter 's' in *Esses* (1982). In *Five Rounds on Famous Words* (1969), even 'Early to bed and early to rise' and 'All that glitters [sic] is not gold' are given a new lease of life. Two further pieces, as brief as they are touching, are well within the capabilities of most choirs: a heart-stopping setting of Shakespeare's *Orpheus with his Lute* and the three-minute chorale *The Lord has a Child*, accompanied by organ/piano or brass.

### Sunset years

The 1960s saw a sharp change in Samuel Barber's fortune. The fiasco that surrounded the premiere of his opera *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ironically the most prestigious commission of his life, plunged the already sensitive composer into a depression from which he never recovered. The remaining 15 years of his life brought few major works, but did see the composition of *Two Choral Pieces* (1968). The first of these is an austere but beautiful setting of Laurie Lee's

dark poem *Twelfth Night*; the second piece, and something of a surprise, is a 30-minute work setting poems by Pablo Neruda. The great Chilean poet's erotic lines (taken from *Twenty Poems of Love and a Song of Sadness*) so shocked the work's commissioners that Barber was prompted to ask them if they had ever had love affairs! The composer matches these words with music of surging romantic lyricism that must have felt positively anachronistic in 1971. After the first performances the work remained unheard for some 20 years; but at a time when Barber's language seems positively forward-looking compared with much that is happening in contemporary American music at the moment, this rich and rewarding work surely merits early revival.

Schuman similarly turned to larger choral works towards the end of his life. The oddity in his output also happens to be one of his finest works, the *Concerto on Old English Rounds* for solo viola, women's chorus and orchestra (1973). The clue to the work's rare performance is in the title, which is unfortunate: Schuman's treatment of well-known rounds such as 'Amaryllis' and 'Come, follow me' is ingenious, and turns the work into a sort of free and rather brilliant fantasia. He wrote, 'I just kept doing things to them – I had a marvellous time,' and a look at this sophisticated score makes clear what he meant. Gone for the most part are the big brass and percussion-laden paeons, and here is a lightness of touch that one might not immediately associate with Schuman the orchestral composer.

Anniversaries can sometimes be useful for reassessing a creative artist's work – one can only hope that 2010 will bring an effort to look again at the music of two fine and underperformed composers. Let choral directors lead the way. ■

*The choral music of William Schuman is published by Theodore Presser ([www.presser.com](http://www.presser.com)) and by G. Schirmer ([www.schirmer.com](http://www.schirmer.com)); Samuel Barber's choral music is published by G. Schirmer. The Schirmer catalogue is exclusively distributed by Hal Leonard ([www.halleonard.com](http://www.halleonard.com); scores are available in the UK from Music Sales, [www.chesternovello.com](http://www.chesternovello.com)).*