

An "Old-Fashioned" American Concerto: Exploring Neo-Romanticism in Samuel Barber's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, Op. 38

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Samuel Barber's *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, Op. 38 was premiered on September 24th, 1962 as part of a weeklong concert series dedicated to the opening of the Philharmonic Hall at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City. In his review for the magazine *Musical America*, Everett Helm described the gala saying:

Everybody was there, in white tie, from the enchanting First Lady [Jackie Kennedy] on down; Nelson Rockefeller, Governor of New York State; Robert Wagner, Mayor of New York City; John D. Rockefeller III, Chairman of the Lincoln Center Board, statesmen, politicians, diplomats, musical celebrities and the high society of New York.¹

This monumental gathering between musicians, composers, and New York high society also coincided with the hundredth anniversary of G. Schirmer, Inc. Barber's work was first commissioned in 1959 by Schirmer for the event. As he had done in his previous Violin and Cello concertos, Barber wrote his Piano Concerto with a particular performer in mind, the pianist John Browning. The concert was performed by a guest orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and was conducted by Erich Leinsdorf.

Reviews of the premiere gave high praise to both composer and performer. Harold Schonberg wrote in the *New York Times* the following morning, "This is a real virtuoso concerto, with some staggeringly difficult writing. It also has a strong sense of melodic profile, a lyric slow movement and a sense of confidence in the entire conception... Mr. Browning stormed the work, surmounted the peaks and proved himself to be a virtuoso with a fine sense of line."² That same morning Louis Biancolli wrote he had witnessed "the birth of an American classic."³ Praise for the work did not wane after the initial reviews. A year after the Lincoln Center concert Jay Harrison wrote in *Musical America*, "in my view it is the best piano concerto ever written by an American, and its newfound fame is more than justified."⁴

Critical acclaim for the concerto soon followed. In 1963 Barber was awarded his second Pulitzer Prize (the first was awarded in 1958 for his opera *Vanessa*), and in 1964 the work received the New York Music Critics Circle Award. Over the next six years Browning toured internationally giving 150 performances of the concerto.⁵ He recorded the concerto with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, conducted by George Szell, in 1965. The album won the Grammy Award for Best Composition by a Contemporary Composer that same year. Barber's biographer Barbara Heyman described this period as the pinnacle of his career, stating "his

¹ Everett Helm, "Lincoln Center Opening," *Musical America*, November 1962, 18.

² Harold C. Schonberg, "Music: Barber Concerto," *New York Times*, September 25, 1962, sect. 2, 32.

³ Louis Biancolli, "Erich Lenisdorf at the Lincoln Center," *New York World Telegram and Sun*, September 25, 1962, 20.

⁴ Jay S. Harrison, "The New York Music Scene," *Musical America*, December 1963, 178.

⁵ David Ewen, *Musicians Since 1900* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1978), 108.

esteem with the international music public and his recognition from the established American cultural institutions were perhaps more secure during the early sixties than those of any other living American composer."⁶ Yet despite the work's notable level of acclaim, several critics criticized its neo-Romantic qualities—a distinction which is still widely held today.

This paper explores the reception history of Barber's hugely successful work and seeks to deconstruct the critics claims of neo-Romanticism. Drawing on Leon Botstein's model for a holistic approach towards reception history, I examine biographical content to uncover Barber's influences and style characteristics, include score analysis, and consider the role collaboration played during the compositional process. Rather than seeing the work as a neo-Romantic regurgitation of late nineteenth-century sensibilities, I suggest Barber's masterful ability to synthesize older formal structures and contemporary compositional trends contributed to the accessibility and ubiquitous success of his concerto.

Analysis of the concert reviews, program notes, and liner notes in album recordings reveal two consistent views held by the critics. First, the unanimous assessment of the work as neo-Romantic and "old-fashioned." Alan Rich wrote, "Samuel Barber has written a big, splashy, old-fashioned concerto."⁷ And Malcolm Rayment wrote that the second movement "might have almost been written 100 years earlier."⁸ Secondly, critics differed significantly when trying to describe the influences of the work. Schonberg referred to the work as "Prokofieffian" in his review.⁹ Thomas Willis wrote in the *Chicago Tribune* "This neo-Romantic concerto... takes a retrospective look at Rachmaninoff and Ravel."¹⁰ A record review of the Cleveland Symphony recording referred to the finale as "somewhat jazzy," which is also reflected in Barbara Heyman's assessment that the finale displays "motoric jazz rhythms."¹¹ Yet Rayment Malcolm wrote, regarding the same movement, "[the] finale in quintuple time... seems to have been much influenced by Bartok."¹² I would suggest that these reviewers are not incorrect in their assessments, rather that this is a reflection of Barber's ability to synthesize a broad spectrum of influences.

These views did not wane over time. As recent as 2010 a reviewer wrote about the concertos indebtedness to Romanticism, "Composing in an age when musical experiment was the fashion and modernism was the main artistic direction, Barber's music is defined by a respect for the nineteenth century tradition, expressed in form, in tonal background, and lyricism."¹³ For some critics the neo-Romantic label was applied pejoratively as another way of saying "not modern." In fact earlier in his career Barber's friend and fellow composer Gian Carlo Menotti defended these types of accusations, writing in the *New York Times*, "it is time for someone to make a reaction against a school of composition that has bored concert audiences for twenty years."¹⁴

⁶ Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 420.

⁷ Alan Rich, "Classical," *High Fidelity*, December 1964, 14. Reprinted from Don Hennessee, *Samuel Barber: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 262.

⁸ Malcolm Rayment, "Orchestral," *Records and Recordings*, April 1975, 21. Reprinted from Hennessee, 262.

⁹ Schonberg, 32.

¹⁰ Thomas Willis, "A Major Talent Comes of Age as Browning Repeats Barber," *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1965, Sect. 2A, 1.

¹¹ Herbert Kupferberg, "Record Reviews," *Atlantic*, February 1965, 134 and Heyman, 4.

¹² Rayment, 21. Reprinted from Hennessee, 262.

¹³ Ovidiu Marinescu, "The Instrumental Concerti of Samuel Barber: The Composer-Performer Relationship," *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov* 3 (2010): 52.

¹⁴ Reprinted from Heyman, 171.

Barber's neo-Romantic influences were inspired in part by his musical education. In 1924, at age 14, Barber was part of the inaugural class at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. Mary Louise Curtis Bok, the founder of the institute, described her goals stating:

It is my aim that earnest students shall acquire a thorough musical education, not learning only to sing or play, but also the history of music, the laws of its making, languages, ear-training and music appreciation. They shall learn to think and to express their thoughts against a background of quiet culture, with the stimulus of personal contact with artist-teachers who represent the highest and finest in their art.¹⁵

Given that members of the faculty were largely recruited from other countries, it seems part of the goal was also to bring European musical sensibilities to American students. Barber's composition instructor, Rosario Scalero, was an Italian composer with a training lineage going back to Brahms. Susan B. Carter described the compositional training Barber received at the Curtis Institute saying, "Scalero's teaching was based on the rigorous Germanic tradition of strict counterpoint and form, combined with characteristically Italian flexibility."¹⁶ The masterful use of counterpoint in the piano concerto can be attributed to this training and the neo-Romantic associations so commonly applied to Barber also reflect this lineage back to Brahms.

On a surface level, the concerto can be understood as an anachronistic juxtaposition of Classical formal structures and late Romantic lyricism and chromaticism. However, analysis of the concerto shows that while Barber did employ the tonality and lyricism for which he is best known, there are also influences from modernist composers. Following the traditional Classical model, the concerto is organized in three movements. The first is in sonata form, the second is a lyrical slow movement, and the finale is a five part rondo. In a somewhat uncharacteristic move, Barber included his own analysis in the program notes for the premiere:

The concerto begins with a solo for piano in a recitative style in which three themes or figures are announced, the first declamatory, the second and third rhythmic. The orchestra interrupts, *pù mosso*, to sing an impassioned main theme, not before stated. All this material is embroidered more quietly and occasionally whimsically by the piano and orchestra until the tempo slackens (*doppio meno mosso*) and the oboe introduces a second lyric section. A development along symphonic lines leads to a cadenza for soloist, and a recapitulation with a fortissimo ending.¹⁷

The three motives (fig. 1) are introduced during a piano introduction and become the basis of the primary and secondary themes.

Barber also uses this material during the transitional passages and the development. The motives are angular and chromatic, played in octaves on the piano. The first motive is built with a rising sixth as the climax, the second a series of tritones, and the third combines elements of both making use of the tritones of the second while utilizing the contour of the first. The movements tonal center of E minor is not established until ms. 19 when the orchestra plays the primary theme (fig. 2). Despite Barber's assertion that the primary theme contained material "not before stated," the theme does appear to relate with motive 'a'. Not only is there a similar relationship between the rhythm and contour, John Robert Hanson also observed that the high

¹⁵ Nathan Broder, *Samuel Barber* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1954), 13.

¹⁶ Susan B. Carter, "The Piano Music of Samuel Barber" (PhD Diss., Texas Tech University, 1980), 6.

¹⁷ Heyman, 415.

points of the successive upward figures in 'a' (e, d#, c#, c-natural, and b) are also reflected in the successive downward figures in the primary theme (d#, d-natural, c#, c-natural, and b).¹⁸

The image displays a musical score for the Piano Introduction of a concerto. It is divided into three sections, each with a blue bracketed label above it:

- First Motive (a):** This section is for Piano I. It begins with a treble clef and a 2/2 time signature. The music starts with a forte (*ff*) dynamic and includes a *con ped.* marking. The tempo is marked *Allegro appassionato* with a quarter note equal to 56 (♩ = 56). The section concludes with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The melody features a series of eighth notes with a descending contour.
- Second Motive (b):** This section is for Piano II (Orchestra). It begins with a bass clef and a 2/2 time signature. The music is marked *cresc.* (crescendo) and features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.
- Third Motive (c):** This section is for Piano I. It begins with a bass clef and a 2/2 time signature. The music is marked *molto* and *allarg.* (ritardando). It includes a *ff* dynamic and a *poco sostenuto* marking. The section concludes with a *5* fingering and a *5* fingering.

Fig 1. Piano Introduction¹⁹

Like a Classical concerto, the movements secondary theme is more lyrical, appearing first in the oboe at ms. 78 in the key of G# minor (fig. 3). This theme more directly alludes to motive 'a' by its incorporation of the ascending sixth. The transitional section between the two themes relies heavily on the use of motives 'b' and 'c' which are often fragmented and played in stretto between the orchestra. Unlike a Classical concerto, Barber places a cadenza directly after the development. The primary theme returns for the recapitulation in the key of E minor, however the secondary theme modulates to B-flat minor, in place of the G# minor in the exposition.

¹⁸ John Robert Hanson, "Macroform in Selected Twentieth-Century Piano Concertos" (PhD Diss., University of Rochester, 1969): 18. Reprinted from Carter, 115.

¹⁹ All score excerpts except fig. 4 taken from Samuel Barber, *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, Op. 38 (New York: G. Schirmer Inc.).

Fig. 2 Primary Theme in ms. 19

Fig. 3 Secondary Theme in ms. 78

The opening seven measures provide the basic cells for which the entire movement would be based. Since there is no sense of a tonal center until the introduction of the main theme, I would suggest that rather than tonally, this movement might be understood as being organized around the melodic, intervallic, and rhythmic procedures outlined in the original motives.

This can be seen as yet another example of synthesis between earlier formal structures and the use of tonal centers, in addition to the more modern strategies of organizing a work around melodic and intervallic language.

The second movement, titled *Canzone*, is the most lyrical and tonally stable of the three and is set in the key of C# minor. It is monothematic, written in a three part modified-strophic form: A, A', A", coda. Use of repetition, lyricism, expression, slow tempo and a relatively small dynamic range (only climaxing at a *forte*), provides a significant contrast with the opening movement. Barber originally wrote the music in 1959 as *Elegy for Flute and Piano*. The original melodic line is distributed between flute, oboe, and piano and relies heavily on harp and strings for the accompaniment. Barber begins the movement with the main theme (fig. 4) introduced in the flute with accompaniment by harp and strings.

Moderato $\text{♩} = 44$

Main Theme

The musical score shows the main theme of the second movement. It is in 3/4 time with a tempo of Moderato (♩ = 44). The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score is divided into two measures. The first measure shows the flute playing a solo line, while the clarinet and harp provide accompaniment. The second measure continues the theme, with the flute playing a more complex melodic line. The harp accompaniment is marked *pp* and *l.u.* (lento), and the strings are marked *pp* and *pizz.* (pizzicato).

Fig. 3 Main theme of Second Movement²⁰

As he had done in the first movement, he uses permutations of the theme as the basis for the movement. This is illustrated by the opening accompaniment in the harp and strings which is derived from the main theme.

Given that Barber was known for his lyricism and neo-Romantic style, it is no surprise that this movement was the one most favored by his critics. In his review of the concerto Nathan Broder sought to distance this movement from Barber's typical anachronistic associations stating, "in Barber's *Canzona* no reminiscences of nineteenth-century music obtrude to break the spell. Instead, we have a lyric poem as fresh as it is lovely."²¹

The finale is a bombastic five part rondo (ABACA) written in 5/4 and grouped metrically in pairs of 2+3. It is tonally centered around the key of B-flat minor and features a driving five note bass ostinato in the piano. Like the opening movement, there is no clearly established tonal center until the main theme, which also coincides with the introduction of the ostinato. This occurs in ms. 6 and is followed by a forty-two measure pedal tone on the tonic held by the orchestra. The long pedal tone and the driving ostinato suggest a rhythmic rather than tonal organization to the movement and might also explain why the work drew comparisons to Stravinsky by some critics. Harmonically the work is built on quartal structures and long sections of parallel seconds.

After examining the three movements it would seem Howard Pollock's assertion that "Barber's actual musical language derived not so much from the music of the Romantic era as from post-romantic styles of the early twentieth century" may provide a more accurate assessment of this particular work.²² Each movement is tonally centered in keys a minor third apart from one another, E minor, C# minor, and B-flat minor. Aside from the second movement,

²⁰ Score excerpt reprinted from Nathan Broder, "Current Chronicle," *The Musical Quarterly* 49, No. 1 (January, 1963): 69.

²¹ Broder, 97.

²² Pollock, 177.

Barber rarely made use of tertiary structures in this work, instead relying on quartal and secundal harmonic figures. The middle movement is clearly the most tonal and the most conservative of the concerto. The critical preference of this movement might suggest that it also conformed most closely to the expectations of those familiar with Barber's music. By writing a large scale work which remained tonal while still employing harsh dissonance, chromatic and angular melodic lines, and unsteady rhythmic figures, Barber made certain elements of modernism more accessible and this might be one of the reasons for the work's success.

The final argument in my paper considers the role of collaboration in the compositional process. Prior to composing the concerto, Barber invited John Browning to spend three days with him with the goal of familiarizing himself with Browning's technical abilities. Heyman writes that, "Barber profited from Browning's stories of Madame Lhévinne [Browning's instructor], her insistence that he practice double sixths, her use of the term *flutter pedal*—keeping a "wet" pedal but shifting it rapidly so the sound does not become too thick—and her "old Russian trick" of effecting a brilliant sound by placing a run of parallel octaves two octaves apart."²³ Many of her suggestions became part of the concerto, such as the bright octaves in the piano introduction and the incorporation of rapid double sixths patterns beginning in ms. 38 of the first movement. In an interview with Heyman, Browning also noted that Barber had a strong reaction to his approach to Debussy and included passages in the third movement which were inspired by his fourth prelude *Les Fée Sont d'exquises Danseuses*.²⁴

This was not a new practice for Barber, in fact he had consulted Vladimir Horowitz during the composition of his Op. 26 Piano Sonata. Horowitz was again consulted while working on the concerto. Browning recalled their meetings:

I first met Horowitz during the period before my premiering Samuel Barber's Piano Concerto in 1962. One day Sam said to me, "John, I think it's time to take the concerto, or as much of it as I've written, over to Volodya to get his opinion of it, as well as any help he can give you." My heart started pounding. I became terrified at the thought of meeting, yet alone playing for, the Great One. Finally the appointed day came. Sam took me, somewhat like a parent with a child on the first day of school, to the beautiful house on the upper East Side. After playing the concerto for him and discussing many things, including tempi and some passages that I felt were unplayable the way Sam had written them at the tempi Sam wanted (Horowitz mercifully agreed with me!), we were treated to Horowitz at the keyboard for close to two hours, playing Liszt transcriptions of Beethoven symphonies, Scriabin, and Rachmaninoff.²⁵

Barber did concede and changed the "unplayable" sixteenth-note passage to a more realistic series of eighth-notes.

A similar story happened in 1960 after the first two movements of the concerto were completed. Barber invited Erich Leinsdorf, the conductor of the Boston Symphony who was scheduled to conduct the work's premiere, to hear samples with Browning playing the piano parts. Leinsdorf took issue with the original ending of the first movement which faded into a *pianissimo*, instead suggesting a *fortissimo* would provide greater contrast with the quiet second movement.²⁶ As with the suggestions made by Horowitz, Barber acquiesced and rewrote the

²³ Heyman, 412.

²⁴ Heyman, 416.

²⁵ John Browning, *Remembering Horowitz*, compiled and edited by David Dubal (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 41.

²⁶ Heyman, 414.

ending of his first movement. At this point in his career Barber had already established himself as one of the leading American composers and did not necessarily need to heed such advice, giving up a certain level of autonomy by revising his work. However, I would suggest that by seeking this counsel Barber was able to compose a more accessible work which appealed to a broader spectrum.

The compositional climate in 1962 was dominated by serialist composers seeking full autonomy in their works. Milton Babbitt's famed essay "Who cares if you listen?" was published just four years prior in 1958. In stark contrast, avante-garde composers were writing aleatory and minimalist works. Barber's concerto fits neither category, which is likely why it was criticized for its conservatism. After more than fifty years, it is worthwhile to re-examine the work and its long held conservative status. The goal of this paper is not to dispel the critics assertions of neo-Romantic traits, rather to add another layer which examines how he synthesized the influences from his training in late nineteenth-century German music with contemporary practices. Though the work is conceptualized as a tonal composition, Barber weaves in and out of distantly related keys by means of non-tonal transitions organized around motivic structures. Another layer is added when considering Barber's efforts to both compose a work which catered specifically to the technical abilities of his performer and his willingness to revise and edit the work based on suggestions by other composers and musicians. It is my assertion then that by combining aspects of modernism with more accessible lyrical and tonal passages, Barber's work appealed to a broader audience, ultimately leading to the works tremendous level of success.

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