

**Samuel Barber** (1910-1981), Summer Music Op. 31 (1955)

“While I’m writing for words, then I immerse myself in those words, and I let the music flow out of them. When I write an abstract piano sonata or a concerto, I write what I feel. I’m not a self-conscious composer. It is said I have no style at all, but that doesn’t matter. I just go on doing, as they say, my thing. I believe this takes a certain courage.” (Samuel Barber, 1971)

The scion of a distinguished West Chester Pennsylvania family, Samuel Barber was trained as a singer, pianist and composer at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia. He received numerous accolades and awards during his life in recognition of his musical accomplishments, including the Prix de Rome, and two Pulitzer Prizes, one for his 1958 opera *Vanessa*, the second for his 1962 *Piano Concerto*. His opera *Anthony and Cleopatra* was commissioned to open the Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center in New York in 1966.

In 1953 the Chamber Music Society of Detroit commissioned Barber to write a septet for three winds, three strings and piano, in commemoration of the Society’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Barber, however, was immersed in the completion of *Vanessa* — ultimately performed at the Metropolitan Opera — and the completion of the new chamber work stalled. In 1954, after attending a concert of the New York Woodwind Quintet in Blue Hill, Maine, he called upon the Quintet’s members to help him to reorganize and complete the commissioned work. *Summer Music* thus became a woodwind quintet, that premiered in Detroit in 1956, and was later revised and shortened to its present form. The title Summer Music was intended to suggest the relaxed character of the season — in Barber’s words: “It’s supposed to be evocative of summer – summer meaning languid, not killing mosquitoes.”

Though played without pauses, Summer Music is a bit like a multi-movement work with graceful transitions between the contrasting sections. The piece opens with an introductory gentle rocking music for horn and bassoon, marked *slow and indolent*, punctuated by outbursts from the flute and clarinet. This introductory music gives way to faster, more rhythmically incisive music in a decidedly Stravinskian vein, featuring short bursts of repeated notes. The indolent music of the introduction returns in a more leisurely treatment, expanded now to function almost as a slow movement, and in its turn leading into the final fast section where a running accompaniment propels the oboe’s syncopated melody, and together the five instruments bubble over at the charming conclusion.

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