Barber, String Quartet, Op. 11

In the years following his graduation from the Curtis Institute, Samuel Barber (1910-1981) spent time traveling and composing in Europe under various stipends and grants. Between 1935 and 1937, he won the Prix de Rome and two Pulitzer Travel Scholarships. Barber’s stay in Rome had a far-reaching effect on his career, for it was there in 1935 that met Arturo Toscanini. Three years later, when Toscanini became conductor of the newly formed NBC Symphony Orchestra, he premiered two new works by Barber: the First Essay and the Adagio for Strings.

Originally, the Adagio was the slow movement of Barber’s String Quartet, written in Rome in 1936. For Toscanini, Barber adapted the Adagio for full string orchestra. Its long, mellifluous lines, lyric intensity, and heartfelt sincerity had an immediate impact on audiences and critics alike. Olin Downes wrote of the premiere, “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.”

In the string quartet, two Molto allegro movements surround the Adagio. The first presents three contrasting themes: the first is frenetic and stop-and-start; the second is lyrical and texturally hymn-like; the third is playful and brief. Barber works out a development involving all three themes, displaying great craftsmanship alongside deep emotional expression. In classic sonata fashion, the three themes are reprised, but in an unexpected way. Barber continues to develop each, expressing new possibilities, even as he concludes the movement.
The brief finale follows the *Adagio* after a short pause. Beginning with a recollection of the first movement’s opening theme, it then proceeds to new material, some of which has that same nervous character, while other music is more pensive, introverted, and lyrical in the mood of the *Adagio*. In the two-and-a-half minute finale, Barber manages to sum up all that has come before.

**Copland, Sextet**

We most often think of Aaron Copland (1900-1990) as a composer who focused on “Americana,” that is, works like *Fanfare for the Common Man*, *Billy the Kid*, and *Appalachian Spring*. However, there was another Copland, who was passionately interested in new developments in modern music. He was not exactly avant-garde, but in his chamber and piano music of the 1930s, he wrote music more for the cultured connoisseur than for the “common man.”

The same held true in his orchestral music not associated with some idea or story. Copland’s *Short Symphony* (1933) is an example. In addition, this work was very difficult to play, and following its premiere by Carlos Chávez and the Orquestra Sinfonica de Mexico in November 1934, the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Boston Symphony cancelled performances of it, because its difficulties would be impossible to overcome within the allotted time for rehearsals. As a result, Copland revised the work for chamber ensemble, and the result was the Sextet for string quartet, clarinet, and piano, premiered in New York in February 1936 and published the following year.

Part of Copland’s “Americana” was his love for and absorption of Jazz rhythms. In the Sextet, he found expression for this in the first movement’s subordinate theme.
That same lilt returns in the finale, but there more popular rhythms also abound: for example The Charleston and popular Mexican dance rhythms. Even in the Sextet’s slow movement, Copland begins in a melancholy mood but cannot remain there long. The middle section of that movement is lighter in mood and more rhythmic in character.

In 1970, CBS Records recorded the Sextet, and Copland played the piano part. He also contributed the following liner note:

The work is in three movements (fast, slow, fast) played without pause. The first movement is scherzo-like in character. Once, I toyed with the idea naming the entire piece *The Bounding Line* because of the nature of the first section. The second movement is in three brief sections — the first rises to a dissonant climax is sharply contrasted with a song-like middle part, and returns to the beginning. The finale is once again bright in color and rhythmically intricate.

**Milhaud, La Création du monde**

During a visit to London in 1920, Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) first heard American-style jazz. On his return to Paris, he began to steep himself in American popular culture, which was beginning to be all the rage among the Parisian smart set. Several of his friends played blues and ragtime, and Milhaud absorbed all he could. Then, in 1923, he went on a tour of the United States and had an opportunity to hear jazz firsthand. One evening Milhaud visited Harlem. The composer writes in his autobiography,

We were the only white folks there. The music I heard was absolutely different from anything I had ever heard before and was a revelation to me. . . . Its effect was so overwhelming that I could not tear myself away. From then on, I frequented other Negro theaters and dance halls.

Back in Paris and fired with enthusiasm for the jazz idiom, Milhaud set to work on the third of his 17 ballets, *La Création du monde*. The scoring for 18 instruments, including a saxophone, is a truly European-American assemblage. Also, the score’s
themes, harmonies, and rhythm are the bare bones of early jazz decked out in European clothing. Particularly striking is the central fugue on a very jazzy subject, a subject that Milhaud later weaves back into the ballet’s fabric.

The ballet’s scenario depicts an African creation legend. Described by musicologist Edward Tatnall Canby,

The creation is portrayed by a seething mass of dancers in weird “op”-style costumes, almost terrifying to the eyes; out of the inchoate mass of vague bodies, life begins gradually to erupt. The mass boils in heaving motion; projections appear, trees shoot up, drop their leaves, which sprout up into weird animals; human forms begin to show — a torso, a great leg; two figures emerge, man and woman, and dance the ritual of creation. The ballet ends on a gentler note as the man and woman, left alone, greet the first springtime, now bathed in quiet light.

It is understandable how puzzled the music critics must have been at the premiere of *La Création du monde*, but it is also understandable how this has become perhaps Milhaud’s most famous work. As the composer’s autobiography reveals,

The critics decreed that my music was frivolous and more suitable for a restaurant or a dance hall than for the concert hall. Ten years later the selfsame critics were discussing the philosophy of jazz and learnedly demonstrating that *La Création* was the best of my works.

**George Gershwin: A Biographical Sketch**

One of America’s national treasures in music is George Gershwin (1898-1937). Born in Brooklyn, New York, of immigrant parents, his musical education was sporadic and fragmented. Beginning with piano, young Gershwin went on to take a few harmony lessons with Rubin Goldmark. As a teenager, Gershwin worked as a song plugger for a Tin Pan Alley publisher, which became a springboard for his own songs. His first hit came in 1919: “Swanee,” which swept the country. This was his entrée to Broadway,
where he conducted his career continuously until he followed a call to Hollywood in the mid-1930s.

While writing razzmatazz musicals during the 1920s (mostly with his brother Ira as lyricist), Gershwin also nursed a desire to combine American jazz and Broadway styles with the European classical tradition. *Lullaby* for string quartet (1919) was his first essay, followed by *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) perhaps his best known work, the Concerto in F for piano and orchestra (1925), Three Preludes for piano (1926), and the symphonic poem *An American in Paris* (1928).

Gershwin’s seriousness about *all* the music he composed continued in the next decade. His political satire, *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), became the first musical to win the coveted Pulitzer Prize in Drama. This honor, however, did not deter him from the concert stage. As a worthy sequel to his Concerto in F, Gershwin wrote *Variations on “I Got Rhythm”* for piano and orchestra in 1934.

The highpoint in Gershwin’s musical output came the following year, when he completed *Porgy and Bess*, premiering it in Boston. It was revolutionary in every way, featuring an all-Black cast of main characters, with a story set on an island village in the Carolinas, and offering a wide spectrum of musical styles in its songs, musical dialogue, and choruses. Usually billed as a “folk opera,” *Porgy and Bess* far transcends that label. As an American opera, it has been tremendously successful abroad, touring several times and entering the regular repertoire of several opera companies outside the United States. A successful movie musical was made of it in 1959, starring Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Diahann Carroll, Sammy Davis Jr., and Pearl Bailey.
Porgy and Bess gained so much immediate publicity that soon Hollywood studios were clamoring to have Gershwin’s songs in their movies. By early 1937, both George and Ira Gershwin were established in Hollywood, and that year yielded Gershwin’s only movie songs, notably “You Can’t Take That Away from Me,” were featured in the film “Shall We Dance?” Gershwin’s sudden death of a brain tumor at the age of 38 stunned the world. Memorial services were held in Hollywood and New York, and the composer was entombed at Hastings-on Hudson, New York.

Perhaps biographer David Ewen summarized the legacy of Gershwin best:

That he had a wonderful reservoir of melodies was, of course, self-evident when Gershwin was alive. What was not quite so obvious then was that he had impressed his identity on those melodies — his way of shaping a lyric line, his use of complex rhythmic patterns and changing meters, the piquant effect of some of his modulations and accompaniments — so that they would always remain recognizably his. His best songs sound as fresh today as they did when first written. Their piquancy, wistfulness, charm, and tenderness have not been dissipated by time. And those lyric outbursts in his larger works — the rhapsodic slow middle section of the Rhapsody in Blue, the slow movement of the Concerto in F, the blues melody in An American in Paris, the best songs of Porgy and Bess — are the creations of a born melodist.

Shulman, Rendezvous

Often to make a living in classical music, the musician must be versatile. That is, in addition to being a performer, it is advantageous also to be able to compose, arrange music, or write about music, and teaching is almost always a necessity. One of the most versatile musicians of the 1930s-1950s was Alan Shulman (1915-2002). Shulman’s career was based chiefly on playing the cello, which he studied at Peabody Conservatory and The Juilliard School. He played at such a high level that he was later chosen to be a charter member of Toscanini’s NBC Symphony Orchestra. He was also a prominent chamber music player, who co-founded the Stuyvesant Quartet, which during the 1940s
and 1950s were noted for their performances and recordings of contemporary quartets of Bloch, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Malipiero, and Hindemith. In 1941, they played the American premiere of the Shostakovich Piano Quintet at Carnegie Hall and recorded it for Columbia Records.

Shulman was also a successful pop arranger and teacher of orchestration. While serving in the U. S. Maritime Service during World War II, he taught orchestration to Nelson Riddle who later became Frank Sinatra’s favorite arranger.

While still a student, Shulman began composing professionally, first for a children’s stage production. Children’s music later proved to be a significant avenue of expression for him. He studied with Hindemith and developed to the point of having his Theme and Variations for viola and orchestra broadcast over NBC in 1941. Similar triumphs followed with his music performed by such virtuosos as Jascha Heifetz.

Another virtuoso was clarinetist Benny Goodman, for whom Shulman composed Rendezvous in 1946. Rendezvous was then recorded by Artie Shaw with the New Music Quartet for Columbia and later by Richard Stoltzman with Tashi for RCA/BMG. In a review of the Tashi recording in Gramophone, Edward Seckerson dubbed the piece a “bon-bon,” and wrote that it “. . . sounds much as its title suggests. A deceptive start, like off-duty Richard Strauss, gives way to swingtime.”