A RECORDING AND GUIDE TO THE PERFORMANCE OF SAMUEL BARBER’S
COMPLETE SOLO PIANO WORKS,
INCLUDING THE RECENTLY PUBLISHED EARLY WORKS

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In 2007, while collaborating with a cellist giving his master’s recital at Ball State University, I had the opportunity to perform Samuel Barber’s Cello Sonata, op. 6. Fascinated with Barber’s musical language, I subsequently performed his Sonata for Piano, op. 26, the following year. I later programmed his Excursions, Nocturne, and Ballade on my doctoral recital. My lecture recital, given in 2010, was based on Souvenirs. Prior to 2010, the works listed above constituted almost the entirety of Barber’s published solo piano works. However, in 2010, G. Schirmer, Inc., published Barber’s early works, manuscripts which previously could be accessed only at the Library of Congress. Although composed before what is typically considered Barber’s compositional maturity, these works display several hallmarks of the composer’s later style, including the lyricism so prevalent in his mature compositions. Of the sixteen recently published solo piano works, only a few short pieces have been recorded thus far. As part of this dissertation project, I have produced the first complete recording of Barber’s published works for solo piano, including those previously available, as well as those published in 2010. This document accompanies my recording. Taken together, it is
my hope that both the recording and performance guide will provide crucial insights for future performers of Barber’s piano works.

**Review of the Literature**

In my examination of the literature surrounding Barber’s piano works, I will review significant discussions of Barber’s life and music, dissertations that analyze his output for the piano, and scholarship that takes a pedagogical approach to select piano works. I will also briefly reference contributions by music theorists to the literature, particularly those articles and dissertations that focus on Barber’s use of serialism.

Recordings by pianists who have recorded what comprised Barber’s complete piano works prior to 2010, as well as Vladimir Horowitz’s recordings of several pieces, form an important portion of my discussion.

Although an abundance of literature is available for the study of Barber and his music, little has been written regarding the works published in 2010. Of the two books that form the foundation for much of Barber scholarship, only one discusses his early works. In 1954, Nathan Broder wrote the earliest significant book on Barber’s life and music.¹ The first half of his book is dedicated to biographical sketches of Barber’s life up to 1954. The second part discusses Barber’s musical style and compositions. Because only three of Barber’s works for solo piano had been published at this point—*Excursions*, the *Sonata for Piano*, and *Souvenirs*—Broder only briefly touches upon Barber’s output for this instrument.

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The second important source, written by Barbara Heyman in 1992, is an exhaustive study of Barber’s life and music. She discusses unpublished early pieces—pieces previously not discussed in the literature—in relation to Barber’s childhood. Full of quotations from Barber’s letters and interviews with his acquaintances, Heyman’s book provides vital background information about his compositions. Heyman also wrote the entry on Barber in *Grove Music Online.*

Additional biographical information about Samuel Barber and detailed discussions of his piano pieces appear in several important dissertations. Susan Blinderman Carter analyzes Barber’s piano works published prior to 1980, focusing primarily on the significance of his contribution to the twentieth-century piano repertoire. In his 1982 dissertation, James Sifferman discusses Barber’s writing style, formal structures, and compositional techniques found in *Excursions, Sonata for Piano, Nocturne,* and *Ballade.* Sifferman identifies three important stylistic elements in Barber’s piano music: the use of traditional formal structures, romantic expressivity, and the incorporation of American folk and jazz idioms. Sifferman dedicates an entire chapter to Barber’s use of tone rows as themes, melodies, or accompaniment; ultimately, Sifferman concludes that, although Barber is a twentieth-century composer, his compositional heart remains in the nineteenth century. In her 1989 dissertation, Laurie Young analyzes the same works as Sifferman, but in considerably greater detail.

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4 Susan Blinderman Carter, “The Piano Music of Samuel Barber” (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1980).
5 James Philip Sifferman, “Samuel Barber’s Works for Solo Piano” (DMA diss., The University of Texas Austin, 1982).
chapter dealing with *Excursions* includes a discussion of jazz and the rise of American nationalism in the 1940s. In her analysis of the *Nocturne* and *Ballade*, Young finds aesthetic parallels between Barber and Frederic Chopin.

The dissertations discussed in the preceding paragraph are a product of the 1980s, and as such, exclude several important piano compositions published since then, as well as *Souvenirs*, a work originally composed for piano duet and only later transcribed for solo piano. Adelaide Leung’s 2010 dissertation addresses this much-neglected work. In her discussion, Leung focuses on aspects of the duet and orchestral versions of the piece to aid the pianist’s interpretation of the solo version, including such aspects as Barber’s choices of instrumentation, articulation, and texture. In his 2007 dissertation, Damon Stevens discusses all of Barber’s piano pieces except for *Sonata for Piano*. His work is directed towards undergraduates, so it is understandable that he does not deal with the sonata, as the technical and musical difficulties of the work would be beyond most undergraduates’ capabilities. Throughout his study, Stevens suggests a relative difficulty level for each work, discusses technical and musical demands, and engages in musical analysis.

Li-Jung Lee’s dissertation approaches Barber from a similarly pedagogical perspective, as she discusses performance and pedagogical issues in selected twentieth-century American compositions, including *Excursions*, based on her own stylistic and

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7 Adelaide Leung, “Samuel Barber’s *Souvenirs*: A Comparative Study of the Solo, Duet, and Orchestral Versions” (DMA diss., The University of Oklahoma, 2010).
8 Damon Stevens, "Introducing the Piano Music of Samuel Barber to the Undergraduate Piano Major" (DMA diss., The University of Cincinnati, 2007).
interpretive analysis. In her discussion of *Excursions*, she suggests that the nationalistic character of *Excursions* and its incorporation of twentieth-century compositional techniques will challenge students. Her document aims to help students in playing the selected compositions, as well as to make twentieth-century American music more accessible to interested musicians.

In the decade following the premiere of *Sonata for Piano*, op. 26, numerous analytical discussions of this work were published. James Fairleigh’s article describes the two different functions of the row in Barber’s *Sonata for Piano* and *Nocturne*: one bears motivic significance, while the other is purely accompanimental. Catharine Lysinger’s dissertation demonstrates continued interest in both tonal and atonal elements of Barber’s sonata. Throughout, Lysinger engages in formal analysis, highlighting various modernist elements, such as bitonality and serialism, that Barber used in the sonata. Her insightful analysis reveals that, while large-scale formal structures emulate classical techniques, smaller-scale compositional idioms demonstrate certain modernist strategies. Lysinger concludes that Barber’s creative process in the sonata is a reflection of his struggle to find his own individual voice as a twentieth-century composer.

Numerous scholars have also discussed Barber’s use of distinctive forms, including the tango, the waltz, and the nocturne. Evan Mack discusses Barber’s consistent use of the waltz, as well as his return to such techniques and musical idioms as

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serialism, vernacular music, and ostinati, within his piano output. Mack examines
selected movements from *Souvenirs*, the sonata, and *Excursions*. In his study of the tango
as a musical genre, Oscar Macchioni provides analyses of tangos for solo piano
composed by six American composers. After discussing the origin and key
characteristics of the tango, Macchioni describes the introduction of the tango to the
United States and its influence on American composers. Macchioni analyzes Barber’s
“Hesitation Tango” from *Souvenirs* as one of the diverse approaches to the tango in the
twentieth century. Chan Kiat Lim discusses the piano nocturne’s connection to
Romanticism in the nineteenth century and neo-Romanticism in the twentieth. Within
this context, Lim describes Barber’s *Nocturne* in relation to the nineteenth-century
nocturne style, focusing particularly on Barber’s attraction to tonality and neo-
Romanticism.

Five published recordings of Barber’s complete solo works (not including the
newly published early works) are available. John Browning, who recorded Barber’s piano
works in 1993, worked closely with Barber before the composer’s death in 1981. As
Browning was the only pianist to work with Barber to produce a complete recording of
his solo piano music, Browning’s recordings hold a unique position in the discography.
Eric Parkin’s 1993 recording emphasizes Barber’s lyricism rather than the rigorous

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12 Evan Mack, “Procedural Consistencies in Samuel Barber’s Piano Music” (DMA diss., University of
Cincinnati, 1980).
13 Oscar Macchioni, “The Tango in American Piano Music: Selected Tangos by Thomson, Copland, Barber,
Jaggard, Biscardi, and Bolcom” (DMA diss., University of Arizona, 2004).
14 Chan Kiat Lim, “Twentieth-century Piano Nocturnes by American Composers: Echoes of Romanticism”
(DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 2004).
15 Samuel Barber, *The Complete Solo Piano Music*, John Browning, MusicMasters 016126712222, CD,
1993.
virtuosity and drive that emerge in many versions of Barber’s piano works. Full of rich rubato, Jeffrey Jacob’s 1995 recording displays clarity achieved by immaculate voicing. Daniel Pollack’s 1998 recording highlights the rhythmic energy of many of Barber’s works, especially in the fugue of the Sonata. Pollack’s recording includes Three Sketches, from Barber’s early works. Leon McCawley recorded Barber’s complete solo piano works in 2007. In 2011, after Schirmer’s publication of the early works, McCawley recorded the solo piano works again—this time including Three Sketches and Interlude II—for another recording label. While not a complete recording of Barber’s piano music, Vladimir Horowitz’s versions of Barber’s Sonata for Piano and Excursions are valuable sources, as Horowitz premiered these works in 1945 and 1949, respectively. In preparation for his premiere of Sonata for Piano, Horowitz worked closely with Barber on issues of interpretation. However, their collaboration began before the work was completed: as Barber was writing the sonata, Horowitz played through portions of the work and offered feedback to the composer. Traces of these early interchanges seem to be reflected throughout the score, as I will discuss further in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Research

In 2010, G. Schirmer Inc. published Barber’s early works, including sixteen pieces previously not available to the general public. To date, only a few of these works

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23 Heyman, 296.
have been recorded. Previous recordings of Barber’s “complete” piano works now constitute less than two thirds of his published solo piano works. Furthermore, one demographic—namely, male American pianists—has dominated the majority of previously published recordings.

My CD comprises the first complete recording of Barber’s solo piano works to include these recently published works. In addition, my performances of previously available pieces provide fresh takes of these familiar works, because of the new lens that these early works offer for interpreting Barber’s entire solo piano oeuvre. Furthermore, my performance of *Souvenirs*, a work considerably less well known than Barber’s other piano works, highlights the rich lyricism, humor, compositional variety, and emotional appeal of this work. By drawing out these qualities shared with Barber’s better-known piano works, my recording attempts to enhance the status of the solo version of *Souvenirs*. Finally, as a Japanese pianist, my recording brings diversity to the current discography, and will also be available to both Japanese- and English-speaking communities.

Although many of Barber’s solo piano pieces have found a place in the repertoire of numerous pianists, little has been written about related performance issues and concerns. Currently, no studies exist that consider the entirety of Barber’s published piano works from a pedagogical perspective. Only two dissertations approach Barber’s piano music from a pedagogical point of view, and both of these consider only selected works. Furthermore, neither of these dissertations is accompanied by a recording, and none of the published recordings of Barber’s piano works include suggestions regarding interpretive or technical details. My project provides both a recording of all the published
piano works of Samuel Barber, as well as a performance guide. This document first discusses background information useful for contextualizing Barber’s piano pieces, and then shares performance and practice suggestions valuable both for piano students learning Barber’s music as well as piano pedagogues teaching these works.
CHAPTER 2

BIOGRAPHY AND OVERVIEW OF BARBER’S PIANO WORKS

Biography of Samuel Barber

Before locating Barber’s solo piano works in the context of his musical style and milieu, I will first discuss his biography, beginning with his early family life and education. Born on March 9, 1910, to a wealthy family in West Chester, Pennsylvania, Samuel Osborn Barber was surrounded by music from an early age. Both his aunt and uncle on his mother’s side were important figures in the musical world of the early twentieth century: Louise Homer was a contralto with the Metropolitan Opera and her husband, Sidney Homer, composed numerous songs with his wife’s voice in mind. When he was only six years old, Barber began taking piano lessons, and a year later, he began studying the cello. At age nine, he started experimenting with composition; by age ten, he had written his first opera, “The Rain Tree.” Barber became an organist at the local Presbyterian Church when he was fourteen. That same year, he entered the newly founded Curtis Institute of Music, studying piano first with George Boyle and later with Isabelle Vengerova. During his second year at Curtis, he added composition as a second major, studying under Rosario Scalero, an Italian composer. In his third year at Curtis, he
also studied voice under Emilio de Gorgoza, becoming the first student at Curtis to major in three distinct areas. His interests ranged beyond these three majors, and he also studied conducting with Fritz Reiner and participated in several foreign language courses. While at Curtis, he met Gian-Carlo Menotti, an Italian composition student with whom he formed a lifelong romantic partnership.¹

After graduating from Curtis in 1933, Barber won numerous prestigious awards, including two Joseph H. Bearns Awards for a violin sonata (1928, lost) and for the *Overture to The School for Scandal* (1931), and the Prix de Rome award for his and *Music for a Scene from Shelly*, op. 7, in 1935. He won the Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship in 1935 and again in 1936. Funded by these awards, Barber traveled to Europe, and spent his time visiting Menotti’s family in Italy, making new musical connections, and expanding his burgeoning compositional abilities. In 1933, the Philadelphia Orchestra performed his *Overture to the School for Scandal*; this was the first time any of Barber’s works were performed by a major orchestra. During the summer of 1933, Barber met Arturo Toscanini, who premiered Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* and his *First Essay for Orchestra* in 1938. This event has been credited with launching Barber into the spotlight of the international musical community.²

Following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, Barber returned to Philadelphia and began teaching composition at Curtis. Although he was drafted into the United States Army in 1943 and was later transferred to the Army Air Force, Barber continued to compose; in 1943, the Army Air Force Band performed his *Commando*

March. He also composed a symphony commissioned by and dedicated to the Army Air Force. A colonel at West Point requested him to write a symphony utilizing avant-garde stylistic techniques in order to reflect the technological advances of the Army Air Force. To accommodate the colonel’s request, Barber used a synthesizer to generate the sound of an aviator’s radio beam.

In 1945, Barber was discharged from the Army Air Force and returned to Capricorn, New York, where he purchased a home with Menotti. During the next two decades he wrote many of his major works. His compositions from this period include *Capricorn Concerto* (1944), *Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra*, op. 22 (1945), *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, op. 24 (1947), and *Sonata for Piano*, op. 26 (1949). He continued to produce major works such as the opera *Vanessa*, op. 32 (1958) and the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, Op. 38 (1962), both winning him Pulitzer Prizes.

In 1966, Barber experienced the first major failure of his career with his *Antony and Cleopatra*, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera for the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. According to the *New York Times*,

“Barber's lushly Neo-Romantic score was deemed anachronistic at a time of rampant, complex high modernism. The very idea of a grand opera based on Shakespeare’s play seemed terribly retro to some.”³ In the years following this failure, Barber suffered from alcoholism and depression. As his productivity drastically declined because of his waning

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mental and physical health, Barber turned to composing short vocal works. He died in 1981 at the age of seventy-one.\(^4\)

**Influences**

In her biography of Barber, Barbara Heyman describes several significant influences that shaped the composer’s preference for neo-Romantic idioms. Heyman asserts that of the many important figures and experiences in his musical education, three emerge as particularly important: his uncle Sidney Homer; his composition teacher at the Curtis Institute, Rosario Scalero; and finally, the years he spent in Europe in the early years of his career.\(^5\)

Homer, who studied with George Chadwick in Boston and Josef Rheinberger in Munich, was a strong advocate of Barber’s earliest compositions. When Barber composed his first opera at age ten, it was Homer alone who encouraged Barber to continue to pursue music composition. Heyman suggests that Homer also acted as Barber’s mentor, offering insights that had a significant impact on Barber for the entirety of his career. Although Homer taught Barber to look to the canonical nineteenth-century composers as compositional role models, he also encouraged Barber to develop his own voice as a composer, often advising him to “ignore superficial intellectualism and transient opinions, to shun the mediocre in art.”\(^6\) Just as Homer’s musical and philosophical ideals strongly influenced Barber’s own neo-Romantic compositional style,  

\(^4\)Carter, 15-21.  
\(^6\)Ibid., 5.
Homer’s opinions about the “superficial intellectualism” of the “mediocre” modernist musical styles further shaped the young composer’s opinions about twentieth-century music.

Rosario Scalero, Barber’s composition teacher at Curtis, was an Italian composer and a pupil of Eusebius Mandyczewsky, who had been a friend of Johannes Brahms. Scalero’s European training and subsequent Eurocentric approach to teaching had a vast influence on Barber’s music. Throughout their lessons, Scalero taught Barber the rigorous Germanic tradition of strict counterpoint and form, focusing first on simple two-part writing and only later on canons and fugues. After years of studying counterpoint, Barber proceeded to study variation form, various smaller musical forms, and sonata form. As an Italian composer, Scalero also taught Barber a certain Italianate flexibility and lyricism. Amid the vast amounts of technical training, however, Scalero encouraged Barber to cultivate an expressive, individualistic voice. Scalero’s training reinforced Barber’s taste in music—a taste that had been previously and similarly nurtured by Homer.

Barber’s numerous trips to Europe developed and demonstrated the composer’s personal and compositional affinity to the continent most often associated with the Romantic canon of great works. He especially frequented Italy, visiting Menotti’s family; from there, he visited other European cities such as Paris, Vienna, and London, as he constantly made new musical contacts. Heyman suggests that Barber’s trips to Europe “solidified his affinity with European culture and intensified his Romantic orientation.”

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7 Broder, 16.
8 Broder, 15-16.
9 Heyman, 5.
All three of these influences clearly had significant impact on Barber’s Romantic musical style. He admired such European masters as Johannes Brahms, Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, among other nineteenth-century composers. When he was in Paris, Barber wrote to his uncle, “How beautiful music is, even though badly played, how much Schubert, even in a four-hand arrangement, can say to us, wrong notes and all! There should be no summer vacation from great music! Not one day!”

Barber’s Musical Style

Although Barber’s musical style frequently has been labeled neo-Romantic and traditional, these labels do not represent his entire musical corpus. While much of Barber’s music does bear such neo-Romantic traits as expressive, lyrical melodies, conventional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century formal structures, and rich tonality, those works composed after 1939 reveal a shift toward twentieth-century compositional idioms. Harmonically, Barber’s style became increasingly dissonant and chromatic, even using twelve-tone serialism on occasion (such as in the Piano Sonata, op. 26 from 1949). Rhythmically, his works became less predictable and more complicated. During these years, he also experimented with vernacular idioms. Excursions (1944) demonstrates his engagement with distinctively American genres such as the blues and boogie-woogie, while Souvenirs (1952) attempts to evoke the feeling of being in “a setting reminiscent of the Palm Court of the Hotel Plaza in New York.”

Because these later works include such twentieth-century elements as intense chromaticism, serialism, rhythmic

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10 Ibid., 331.
complexity, and popular idioms, Nathan Broder questions the classification of Barber’s music as neo-Romantic:

Now pigeonholing of this sort often results in over-simplification; and labeling Barber’s music neo-Romantic, while helpful in describing his earlier works, disregards significant elements in his later and more important products. Traditional procedures are characteristic of all of Barber’s music up to about 1939. After that time, however, they begin to be mingled with, replaced by, methods that can only have arisen in the musical climate of our time. This change and growth in style—gradual, and perhaps not yet completely consummated—reveals itself in the melodic structure of his music, in its harmonic and contrapuntal texture, and in its rhythm.  

Nevertheless, three musical elements remain constant in Barber’s entire compositional output: expressive lyricism, conventional formal models, and well-established tonal centers. Indeed, of all the elements that might characterize his musical style, lyricism appears to be the most important. Broder describes how Barber’s lyricism set him apart from many of his contemporaries:

Lyricism is not a prominent quality in the significant American music of the 1930s. The decade is marked by a search for style, a development or integration of individual techniques, a working-out of personal idioms… The ferment of such a time produced important and exciting works, but it was not conducive to the calm contemplation of beauty for its own sake. Barber, primarily a lyric poet, remained aloof from the swirling currents in which many of his colleagues were immersed. His visions were not of the sort that required the forging of an individual idiom. They could be best expressed in an existing and well-known tongue.

Barber’s understanding of the human voice—gained through his experience as both a singer and a composer of art songs—may have led him to emphasize the melodic lines within his instrumental works. Throughout his career, Barber wrote over one hundred art songs, which constitute two-thirds of his output. The lyrical style that Barber cultivated in these songs is reflected in many of his instrumental compositions.

12 Broder, 47.
13 Broder, 58.
Barber’s use of traditional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century forms remained remarkably consistent throughout his entire career. According to Broder, “Barber’s feeling for form is very strong, and it is in this respect that his music shows the closest ties with the past. The large works are firmly rooted in the principles of sonata construction.”\(^{14}\) His connection to traditional formal models was reinforced by the personal guidance he received from Scalero.

Though his approach to tonality widely varies throughout his career, Barber’s use of clear tonal centers remains a unifying thread within all of his works. His early works, composed prior to 1939, are based strictly on tertian harmony, while his later works often employ secundal and quartal harmonies, occasional polychords, and numerous tritones. Yet, despite the disparity of his tonal language, the tonal centers remain clearly identifiable.

While such traditional elements as lyricism, conventional formal structures, and tonality are consistently present in Barber’s output, these are combined with distinctly twentieth-century musical elements, including the limited use of twelve-tone serialism, complex rhythms, and vernacular idioms. The fusion of traditional and contemporary techniques makes his music uniquely his own, as well as a significant contribution to the music of the twentieth-century.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., 56.
Overview of Published Piano Works

Barber’s piano works remain among the most celebrated in the entirety of twentieth-century piano literature. Following Vladimir Horowitz’s performances of *Excursions*, Op. 20 and *Sonata for Piano*, Op. 26, both works quickly entered the standard piano repertoire. With the recent publication of Barber’s early piano works, composed between ages seven and twenty-one, Barber’s music will hopefully begin to reach an even broader audience and to expand the repertoire of numerous pianists.

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss Barber’s published solo piano works in chronological order of their composition, locating each alongside relevant events in his life. While the scope of this document does not permit a detailed examination of each piece, my discussion will provide a sense of where each work fits within Barber’s overall output for the piano. In addition to works that have been in the repertoire for some time, I will also discuss certain of Barber’s piano works composed during his youth. While facsimiles of Barber’s piano works composed prior to 1923 are included in an appendix to G. Schirmer’s compilation of Barber’s early piano works, these works are not representative of the composer’s output as a whole, though they remain remarkable testaments to Barber’s musical gift at an early age. Thus, I will begin my discussion with those works written after 1923.

*Themes* (c. 1923) (I. Menuetto; II. Andante Religioso; III. Allegretto on C)

By the time Barber composed *Themes*, at the age of thirteen, he had already been writing music for seven years and had decided upon a career as a composer.\(^{15}\) Barber’s lyrical style, encouraged by both Sidney and Louis Homer, manifests itself already in this

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\(^{15}\)Heyman, 7.
early work, which features song-like melodies throughout the movements. Furthermore, Heyman suggests that Barber’s early works reflect the compositions that he was studying at that time. When he composed “Allegretto on C,” for example, Barber was studying Clementi’s *Sonatina*, Op. 36, No. 1. There are definite similarities in the pitch range and accompanimental patterns between these two works. Overall, *Themes* displays the simplicity expected of an adolescent composer: short ABA forms with predominantly diatonic writing. Yet the sentimental lyricism of many of the melodies found throughout *Themes* demonstrates an unusual maturity for a composer of such a young age.

**Petite Berceuse** (c. 1923)

In *Petite Berceuse*, a peaceful melody is accompanied by a quiet rocking motion in the left hand. Compared to *Themes*, which was likely written in the same year, this work explores a wider range of the keyboard and requires a broader command of dynamics, indicating Barber’s rapid growth as a composer. The opening harmonic progression, I-VI-I-VIb, which seems to mirror the motion of a cradle, demonstrates Barber’s increasing command of the harmonic language.

**Three Sketches** (c. 1923-1924) (I. Love Song; II. To My Steinway; III. Minuet)

In *Three Sketches*, Barber’s lyrical abilities continue to develop. The first piece, “Love Song,” features a far more intricate texture than any of his works written prior to 1924. Indeed, the prevalence of moving inner lines in this piece foreshadows his mature compositional style. Furthermore, this movement, marked “Tempo di valse,” resembles *Souvenirs*, written almost thirty years later, with its use of early twentieth-century dance inspired harmony. “To My Steinway” bears the dedicatory inscription, “To Number

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16Heyman, 12.
230601,” the manufacturing edition number of his Steinway. The affection the young composer held for his piano is apparent in this composition. Rolled chords and sweeping figures are written in a gentle manner, as if to show off the capability of the instrument. The last movement, “Minuet,” reworks the early “Menuetto” from Themes. In this revision, “Minuet” is significantly expanded through the superimposition of the melody from Beethoven’s Minuet no. 2, WoO 10 on Barber’s second statement of his own theme. Barber’s ability to mold the same melody to fit a variety of forms, a technique that is highly pronounced in his mature compositions, is already evident here.

**Prelude to a Tragic Drama (1925)**

According to Jeanne Behrend, Barber’s classmate at Curtis, this piece was written for a “melodramatic skit of some kind.” Composed during his first year at Curtis, the Prelude indicates the further maturing of Barber’s skills as a pianist and composer. Throughout, a broader emotional range is explored with the use of a modulation to a distant key (from A minor to B major), changing tempo indications and meter, and the use of the extreme ranges of the keyboard.

**Fresh From West Chester (Some Jazzings) (1925-1926) (I. Poison Ivy; II. Let’s Sit It Out; I’d Rather Watch, A Walls)**

This two-movement work was written during the summer after Barber’s first year at the Curtis Institute. Humorous titles and performance instructions show the young Barber’s wit. For instance, “Poison Ivy” has tempo markings “Allegro, as a dog wags his tail,” “sock it,” and “with itching.” The second movement, too, has performance

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18Heyman, 25.
19Walters, 7.
instructions such as “flirtatiously; molto koketto,” “shockingly,” and “more flirtatiously.”
“A Walls,” the subtitle to the second movement, is a play on the word “waltz.” Like the 
Love Song from the _Three Sketches_, Barber again uses what appears to be his favorite 
dance form. This movement contains four-measure phrases with an oom-pah-pah 
accompaniment, both of which are characteristics of the waltz. While Barber would 
return to the waltz genre in his mature compositions—the first movement of _Souvenirs_ 
and parts of the second movement of the _Sonata_—his manipulation of this dance form in 
such an early work is remarkable.

**To Aunt Maime on Her Birthday (1926)**

After referencing Barbara Heyman’s forthcoming book, _A Comprehensive Thematic Catalog of the Works of Samuel Barber_, Richard Walters writes that “Aunt Maime” may have been a family friend, for whom Barber’s sentiments are revealed in 
this brief lyrical piece. Despite its overall simplicity, Barber subtly varies the recurring 
theme by adding the thirds beneath the melody and altering the accompaniment pattern.

**Essay I for Piano; Essay II for Piano; Essay III for Piano (1926)**

Throughout the _Essays_, Barber explores the unifying capabilities of rhythm. In 
_Essay I_, for example, the same dotted rhythm is omnipresent over five pages. Similarly, 
_Essay II_ repeats the same eighth-note right-hand rhythm with a left-hand accompaniment 
pattern for over forty-five measures. Another noteworthy feature prominent throughout 
the _Essays_ is Barber’s newfound flexibility of phrase length, in which the four-measure 
phrases that dominated his earlier works are replaced by asymmetrical phrases of varying 
lengths. In _Essay I_, the left hand carries the melody, while the right hand plays chords in

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20_Heyman, 45._
21_Walters, 8._
sixteenth notes. Essay II features rapid constant sixteenth notes in parallel motion.

Throughout Essay II, Barber again uses creative performance indications, such as “like a very hot summer night,” “Vaguely,” and “at Lenape perhaps.” Essay III builds force throughout the work, to the extent that Barber utilizes three staves mid-way through the piece to include larger pitch ranges and combinations. Within this Essay, Barber uses canonic imitation to intensify the climax, foreshadowing the build-up in one of his last piano pieces, Nocturne, op. 33.

**Interlude I (1931); Interlude II (1932)**

When he wrote the two Interludes, Barber had already been recognized as an emerging composer, having won two Bearns Prizes in 1928 and 1931, respectively. The Interludes were written as an assignment for Scalero, and Barber performed these pieces at the Twenty-fifth Students’ Concert of the Curtis Institute of Music on 12 May 1932. According to Heyman, Brahms’s intermezzi form the prototypes for these two pieces. Indeed, Barber’s use of thick textures, extreme registers, and hemiola seem to take quintessential elements of Brahms’ keyboard writing as their model. Both Interludes are in ABA form. In Interlude I, the A section features counterpoint between the upper and middle voices, accompanied by a tremolo-like bass. In contrast to the intimate and multi-layered Interlude I, Interlude II is agitato and robust in character, with hands alternating energetically throughout.

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22 Walters speculates that “Lenape” refers to the Lake Lenape Park near where Barber grew up.
23 Heyman, 78.
24 Ibid., 77.
Excursions, op. 20 (1944) (I. Un poco allegro; II. In slow blues tempo; III. Allegretto; IV. Allegro molto)

Barber began composing Excursions in 1942. By this time, the composer had won two American Pulitzer prizes, which enabled him to travel to Europe to study and make important musical connections. Barber described the Excursions as follows: “These are ‘Excursions’ in small classical forms into regional American idioms. Their rhythmic characteristics, as well as their source in folk material and their scoring, reminiscent of local instruments are easily recognized.” The boogie-woogie first movement features a motor-like bass ostinato for the left hand, with the right hand providing an off-beat improvisatory melody. The use of terraced dynamics, combined with the motoric bass ostinato, reminds one of an urban traffic scene. As its expressive marking indicates, the second movement is in the style of the blues. The slow and relaxed atmosphere of this movement brings great contrast to the set. The third movement is lyrical and seemingly carefree; however, it is the most challenging of the set. A cross-rhythm of seven against eight forms the basis of the movement and the rhythm only becomes more complex as the piece progresses. The fourth movement is a hoedown. The use of simple harmonies throughout captures the essence of this American dance form. Barber’s imitation of a banjo is apparent at the recapitulation when dissonant grace notes are added to the reprise of the opening chords. Premiered by Horowitz in 1945, Excursions is one of the most frequently performed piano works by Barber.

Sonata for Piano, op. 26 (1949) (I. Allegro energico; II. Allegro vivace e leggiero; III. Adagio mesto; IV. Fuga: Allegro con spirito)

The Piano Sonata has come to be widely considered Barber’s most successful piano composition. Prior to premiering this work in 1950, Horowitz worked closely with Barber throughout the compositional process; according to Glen Plaskin, Horowitz suggested that Barber add the virtuosic last movement to the sonata. The pianist said, “I saw three movements and told him the sonata would sound better if he made a very flashy last movement, but with content. So he did that fugue, which is the best thing in the sonata.” Furthermore, Heyman suggests that several markings on the score were likely added in light of Horowitz’s style of performance, such as the con molto pedale marking in the second measure of the third movement and the cadenza at m. 98 in the last movement.

The Sonata demonstrates Barber’s attempt to use contemporary compositional techniques. Twelve-tone rows are employed in the first and the third movement, though not in a strict sense. Rather, the rows are used selectively through what is a predominantly tonal work. Throughout the dramatic, sonata-allegro form first movement, half-step motion becomes a unifying force. The second movement reflects a scherzo-like playfulness. In contrast, the third movement is grave, with an ostinato bass comprised of six dyads. The piece ends with a virtuosic fugal movement that requires immense physical capacities from the performer.

27Heyman, 305.
**Souvenirs, op. 28 (1952)** (I. Waltz; II. Schottiche; III. Pas de deux; IV. Hesitation Tango; IV. Galop)

*Souvenirs* consists of six movements, each of which is based on a different ballroom dance. Originally written as a piano duet, Barber and his friend Charles Turner played this work to entertain their friends. Barber had no intention of publishing *Souvenirs* until Lincoln Kirstein, a choreographer and the director of the New York City Ballet, suggested that Barber orchestrate the suite for a ballet. Barber orchestrated and subsequently transcribed the work for solo piano in the same year. Barber’s own writings about *Souvenirs* suggest that the work held certain nostalgia for him, as he remembered an earlier America as well as his own childhood. In the preface to the *Souvenirs* duet score, Barber wrote: “One might imagine a divertissement in a setting of the Palm Court of the Hotel Plaza in New York, the year about 1914, epoch of the first tangos; “Souvenirs” – remembered with affection, not in irony or with tongue in cheek, but in amused tenderness.”²⁸ Furthermore, Barber’s mother had taken the young Barber to the Palm Court Plaza for afternoon tea when he was a child, thus suggesting that the composer might have recalled personal memories when composing this work.²⁹

The solo piano version of *Souvenirs* is considerably less well known than many of Barber’s other piano works. One of the reasons for this neglect may be that the work is better known as a duet than as a solo piece. Moreover, because the solo version is transcribed and arranged from the duet version, the work is difficult for a single performer to execute. Thick chords, dense polyphony, and wide leaps abound throughout the dances. In terms of the technical difficulty, *Souvenirs* rivals Barber’s Piano Sonata.

²⁹Heyman, 329.
Within *Souvenirs*, however, these technical challenges are embedded within an essentially light-hearted work.

**Nocturne, Op. 33 (Homage to John Field) (1959)**

The *Nocturne* was premiered by John Browning in San Diego, California in 1959. In this piece, a chromatic melody is accompanied by an arpeggio accompaniment, thus creating a remarkable blend of nineteenth and twentieth-century styles. Here, twelve-tone rows are used, but only partially, as in the *Sonata*. Though Barber noted the piece as “homage to John Field,” Barber’s use of versatile rhythm and embellishments of the melodic line are all characteristics of Chopin’s Nocturnes, rather than Field’s. Browning comments on this in his article for Clavier magazine, “I think Sam was paying tribute, not so much to John Field as to Chopin, who often spoke of his admiration for Field’s nocturnes. I doubt that Sam loved Field’s music the way he loved Chopin’s. So, in essence, Sam honors Chopin in this small but powerful work.”

**Ballade, op. 46 (1977)**

The *Ballade* was written as the required piece for the fifth Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. Barber was informed in August 1974, “Mr. Cliburn requests this piece, ‘A Ballade,’ be written in the beauty and difficulty of the Samuel Barber style.” *Ballade* is one of only a few compositions written during the later years of Barber’s career. By this time, he suffered from depression as well as alcoholism, both of which significantly reduced his creative output. Heyman suggests that the stress Barber was under at this point in his life reveals itself in the penmanship of two manuscripts of this piece, now held at the Library of Congress, in which, “although the

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31 Heyman, 495.
notation is legible, expression markings are uncharacteristically irregular and labored compared to Barber’s usually graceful script.” Indeed, his manuscripts for the *Ballade* are uncharacteristically untidy, and furthermore, the pages are chaotic, with entire sections cut out and taped elsewhere. Also, in this ABA form, the reprise is identical to the first A section. In the manuscript, Barber simply writes D.C. to indicate the repeat of the section. Such a decision seems unusual for Barber, who had previously nearly always embellished or changed the second statement of a theme. Alongside the evidence gleaned from the handwriting and disorganization of the manuscript, this formal decision further suggests the labor this work cost Barber. However, like many of Barber’s other piano works, the *Ballade* is highly idiomatic. The B section, which provides a stark contrast to the mysterious A section, is tempestuous and bears much virtuosity but is still written quite pianistically.

**Manuscripts**

Nearly all of Barber’s manuscripts, including those of his youth, utilize neat handwriting and precise placement of expressive markings, and thus the performer may trust that the markings on the printed scores are indeed reflective of Barber’s preferences. Little has been added in the editorial process of transforming manuscripts into prints. Indeed, his manuscripts and several iterations of printed scores for *Excursions* and *Ballade*, now stored at the Library of Congress, reveal Barber’s involvement in the editing process with Schirmer. Barber’s early works, only recently released by Schirmer,

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32Heyman, 496.
include significantly more additions and alterations by the editor due to the young composer’s untrained notation, each of which is noted in the edition.

Many of Barber’s manuscripts are stored at the Library of Congress, and his manuscripts of his early works are available for viewing on their website. Barber’s music is published exclusively through Schirmer, Inc.

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Performance Practices

Barber spoke little about his music, let alone how it ought to be performed. Reminiscing about Barber, Paul Wittke wrote that the composer “rarely discussed his own music (a modesty alien to most composers); if he did, he made sport of it, although he was ferociously proud of it.”\(^1\) His piano scores, never crowded with excessive performance markings, suggest that Barber allowed for much interpretive freedom on the part of the performer. Despite Barber’s silence on this topic, several recordings shed light on the issue of performance practice in Barber’s piano works, including those of John Browning, Vladimir Horowitz, and Barber accompanying the soprano, Leontyne Price.

John Browning worked closely with Barber, premiering both his Piano Concerto, Op. 38 and Nocturne, Op. 33. Browning’s 1993 recording, entitled Samuel Barber: The Complete Piano Music, contains Barber’s mature piano works and Interlude I.\(^2\) The solo arrangement of Souvenirs, Op. 28 is not included; however, Browning did record the

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He loved the old Russian style of pianism, and his special favorite was Vladimir Horowitz, for whom he wrote the \textit{Piano Sonata}. He liked big tone, broad romantic style, ample but intelligent use of pedal, lush sonorities, strong voicings—in short, all the best attributes of Horowitz. It is with this type of style that all of Barber’s piano music must be approached.\footnote{John Browning, “Samuel Barber’s Nocturne, Op. 33,” \textit{Clavier} 25 (1986): 20-21.}

Browning proves to be faithful to this notion in his recording of Barber’s piano works. His pedaling is rich yet sensitive. Throughout, he explores the extremes of emotions with a wide dynamic range and flexible phrasings. Through carefully controlled voicing technique, Browning clearly brings out the melody while skillfully manipulating the surrounding texture. Furthermore, his pronounced voicing of the bass provides a solid foundation for the melody and a richness to the sound.

As I discussed briefly in the previous chapter, Horowitz was an important figure for Barber, to such an extent that the pianist influenced Barber’s composition of \textit{Sonata for Piano}, Op. 26. Horowitz’s performances of Barber’s \textit{Sonata} during his 1949-1950 recital season made the piece an instant success.\footnote{Barbara Heyman, \textit{Barber: The Composer and His Music} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 296.} Throughout, the writing showcases Horowitz’s unique technique at the piano. For instance, Heyman suggests that Barber added the ascending thirty-second note figure that concludes the second movement and the cadenza at m. 98 in the last movement after consulting Horowitz.\footnote{Heyman, 301.} One can imagine the pianist adding improvisatory flashy runs, just as he would in places in his own
transcription of Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody* No. 2 and his *Variations on themes from Carmen*. Horowitz’s performances of these moments within the *Sonata*, as well as his renditions of three of the *Excursions*, provide an insightful gloss on Barber’s scores.\(^5\)

Though Horowitz felt a certain discomfort with the American style prevalent in the *Excursions* (and Barber even noted that “He [Horowitz] says he can’t figure out how to play the blues”\(^6\)), this recording renders the piece with much charm and virtuosity.

Although Barber did not make a living as a performer, the recording featuring Barber accompanying Leontyne Price illustrates the composer’s skill and sensitivity at the piano.\(^7\) Throughout the recording, Barber accompanies the soprano on numerous songs, including his own. While his playing remains subtly subordinate to the singer, he simultaneously provides strong support, just as John Browning would support the melody within his performances of Barber’s solo piano music. Barber keeps everything above the bass line legato and florid to allow the singer to express freely, without the worry of interfering with distinct articulations. The fluidity of his playing is amplified by the rich use of the damper pedal. Occasionally, Barber draws out counterpoints to the melodic line, allowing these new lines to mingle as equals with the vocal line. Barber’s careful attention to the texture of the musical fabric offers a wealth of performance practice suggestions to the pianist approaching Barber’s works for the first time.

Though numerous other excellent recordings of Barber’s piano works have been released, those discussed above remain particularly important because of their proximity

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\(^5\) Horowitz’ recording of Barber’s Sonata\(^5\) as well as three of the *Excursions*, Op. 20 \(^5\) (movements I, II, and IV) are available from RCA.

\(^6\) Heyman, 234.

\(^7\) *Leontyne Price and Samuel Barber, Historic Performances*, recorded 1938 and 1953, Bridge 090404915628, compact disc.
to the composer. Both Browning and Horowitz worked closely with Barber, and thus their performances may offer a window into Barber’s conception of his piano works. Furthermore, Barber’s collaboration with Price brings the composer’s emphasis on lyricism to the fore, as he guides the listener toward the melodic line with grace and sensitivity. Though the performer may learn much through listening to other recordings, these three in particular should be examined for their important insights into Barber’s ideas regarding his piano works.

Technical and Musical Difficulties Examined

In this section, I will address certain technical and musical difficulties common to Barber’s piano output. Throughout, I will discuss issues pertaining to three general characteristics of Barber’s piano works: lyricism, virtuosity, and eclecticism. Within each of these areas, I will offer practical suggestions on how to maximize the musicality of Barber’s works, as well as how to minimize the technical difficulties inherent to them. Throughout the process of learning and recording Barber’s piano pieces, I constantly came across these characteristics that fascinated me as well as challenged me musically and technically. By discussing these performance suggestions in this manner I hope that it will help future performers of Barber’s piano works to approach them with a clear direction and concept of his music.

Lyricism

Throughout the past few decades, Barber’s name has become nearly synonymous with twentieth-century lyricism. With lush sonorities supporting tuneful melodies, much of Barber’s music has proven to be more approachable for a broader audience than the
experimental music of his peers. Such lyricism, manifest in his early and mature works, remains a characteristic of Barber’s musical style throughout numerous genres, including his piano works. Barber’s understanding of the human voice—gained through his experience as both a singer and a composer of art songs—may have led him to emphasize the melodic lines within his instrumental works.

Many of his piano pieces, especially the ones composed during his youth, treat the melody as if it were meant for a vocalist. The melodies often feature a narrow range, stepwise motion, and simple rhythms—indeed, all the characteristics of an easily singable melody. “Menuetto” from Themes, which Barber wrote in his early teens, already demonstrates the young composer’s gift for such lyrical writing (see example 3.1). This tuneful lyricism also appears in his mature works, such as in the slow movement from Souvenirs (see example 3.2). Numerous other melodic lines—especially in his other mature works—are significantly more complex, with larger ranges and intricate rhythms, as in the third movement of the Sonata for Piano (see example 3.3). Here, Barber’s chromaticism contrasts dramatically with the diatonic simplicity of the previous examples.
Example 3.1: Samuel Barber, *Themes I*, “Menuetto,” mm. 1-19

Example 3.2: Barber, *Souvenirs III*, “Pas de deux,” mm. 1-10
Example 3.3: Samuel Barber, *Sonata for Piano* III, Adagio mesto, mm. 1-5

The prevalence of lyricism in Barber’s music requires the performer to clearly project the melodic line. This is not to say that the performer should just play the melodic line louder. Rather, the melodic line should emerge clearly from a carefully controlled accompaniment, similar to the way Barber accompanied Leontyne Price. Several examples will illustrate this technique. In Barber’s *Nocturne*, op. 33, an arpeggiated accompaniment supports a lyrical melody in a manner reminiscent of Chopin. The left hand’s fingering should be carefully determined in order to allow for maximum connection between notes. For this example, I suggest using 5-3-2-1-2-3 and 5-4-2-1-2-4 as indicated in example 3.4. This fingering will allow the arm to move in a circular motion. The performer needs flexible arms and wrists to incorporate large movements, rather than small note-by-note motions. Thus, it is essential that the pianist practice the
accompaniment alone, without pedal, to develop an evenness of tone and to achieve a finger-legato.

Example 3.4: Barber, *Nocturne*, op. 33, mm. 1-4

Barber’s bass lines often offer harmonic and rhythmic support for the relatively free melodies swirling above them. Example 3.5 clearly illustrates an early work in which the lowest bass note of each measure serves not only to mark the downbeat but also to highlight harmonic shifts. In the mature works, Barber’s placement of important structural bass notes can be more disguised. In example 3.6, the two lowest notes of each measure occur first on the downbeat, but then on a weak beat during the second half of the measure.
Example 3.5: Barber, *Petite Berceuse*, mm. 1-8

Example 3.6: Barber, *Excursions* III, Allegretto, mm. 1-8

The bass line should always provide contextually appropriate support for the melody above it. In example 3.6, although it is tempting to bring out the strong beats (G-
flat and B-flat in the first measure), the lowest notes in the bass (G-flat and E-flat) need to be emphasized instead. As a practice technique, I suggest playing the bass line alone, without pedal, in order to find the ideal sound and shape. Then, practice the melody and bass line without the inner notes, since the performer needs to be able to hear them above everything else that is going on. Once the performer can clearly hear what she wants to bring out, she can begin adding in the pedal.

The damper pedal needs to accommodate the bass placements very carefully. As example 3.6 reveals, the harmony change occurs at the second half of the measure creating an equally divided measure of four plus four eighth notes. However, the lowest note of the entire measure plays an eighth beat after that. Pedals need to be changed where the lowest note plays, as shown in the example, not at the harmony change. This way the melodic line retains its bass support continuously, without a sudden gap at the change of harmony mid-measure.

Regarding Barber’s Nocturne, John Browning wrote, “The right hand melody is marked mezzo piano; I would play it a big, warm, mezzo forte.” Bringing out the melody, however, is not the only reason Browning’s melodies sing out so beautifully. As his recording demonstrates, the accompaniment is supportive, rather than simply subordinate, providing a solid foundation for the melody. In order to skillfully achieve this result, the performer needs to maintain great control over her left-hand accompaniments. And, as discussed above, rich use of the pedal can bring out Barber’s lyricism and lush sonorities, but it always needs be sensitive to the bass line.
**Virtuosity**

Many of Barber’s piano works challenge performers by requiring vast technical facility. One of the foremost examples of this musical style is his *Sonata for Piano*, op. 26. With its ferociously difficult fugal final movement, the *Sonata* has become a standard in the repertoire of many international piano competitions. Numerous other pieces, including *Souvenirs*, op. 28 and *Excursions*, op. 20, require the performer to demonstrate a similar technical capability. Some of the key elements of this musical style, characterized by both virtuosity and driving energy, include extended pitch ranges, dense textures, rapid rhythms, and complex ostinatos.

Within many of his works, Barber uses thick textures and wide pitch ranges to create exciting climactic moments. Textural growth, in particular, often serves as an important device to build up to these climaxes. For instance, both the “Hesitation Tango” from *Souvenirs* and the last movement of the *Sonata for Piano* progress from a relatively thin texture to one that is denser and also covers a larger span of the keyboard at climactic moments (see examples 3.7 and 3.8). To successfully perform such works, much control is required from the performer. Voicing, as discussed in the previous section with regard to lyricism, remains exceptionally important. When the texture thickens, the melody must not be buried beneath all the competing lines. Furthermore, throughout the gradual build up to the climax, the performer should take care not to reach the maximum volume too early, so that the climactic moment remains effective. One practice technique that may aid the performer with this latter problem is to plan the dynamic build-up by playing the loudest notes first, then making her way backward, thus ensuring that the material leading up to the climax is indeed quieter.
Barber’s use of a large span of the keyboard often results in quick registral shifts. As example 3.7 illustrates, a sweeping figure rapidly travels from one register to another at m. 58. Example 3.8 features a sudden shift in positions. An economical approach to the keyboard proves essential for executing such rapid motions. Indeed, the performer should allot extra time to these sections in the score to secure the motion from one side of the keyboard to the other. For large leaps, like those featured in example 3.8, make sure that the arms are flexible and lead each large leap with the elbow, as locking the joints not only delays the motion but also keeps it from sounding natural.

Example 3.7: Barber, *Souvenirs*, Op. 28, V. “Hesitation Tango,” mm. 51-64
Rhythmic drive contributes significantly to the virtuosity of Barber’s piano works. In the “Hesitation Tango” from *Souvenirs* (an excerpt of which is provided above in example 3.7), Barber constantly plays with the listener’s expectations by juxtaposing triplets on top of the *habanera* accompaniment in m. 53-56. Cross-rhythms like this prevail in the third movement of *Excursions* in an even more complex manner, as example 3.9 exemplifies.
In this movement, the performer must maintain excellent command over such cross-rhythms. Rather than trying to mathematically fit the different rhythmic patterns together, which tends to result in an unnatural flow and character, one should focus on the horizontal lines. In example 3.9, the left hand provides a steady quintuplet accompaniment while the right hand plays the melody mainly in triplets. In sections like these, the performer should practice the left hand alone, making the arpeggio pattern as steady and smooth as possible. Furthermore, the pianist ought to maintain a uniform arm motion to help achieve the optimal flow—a flow that can be maintained even when the right hand is layered on top of the left.

Another technique Barber uses to drive certain works forward is ostinato. Throughout much of the first movement of *Excursions*, an ostinato bass dominates the musical texture (see example 3.10). Here, the ostinato bass is introduced in the left hand and reinforced by counterpoint in the right hand a measure later. Barber interrupts this ostinato at m. 7, but quickly resumes the figure providing a sense of constant drive to the movement. An ostinato bass also accompanies the third movement of the *Sonata for Piano* (see example 3.11). As in the previous example, the ostinato bass opens the movement by itself, and then continues in the left hand after the right hand melody enters. The presence of the ostinato here provides an ominous and labored character to the entire movement. Although this ostinato is not as active as the previous example, it still manages to maintain a deliberate, inexorable feeling of motion throughout the movement.
Example 3.10: Barber, *Excursions*, Op. 20, I. Un poco allegro, mm. 1-8

Example 3.11: Barber, *Sonata for Piano*, op. 26, III. Adagio mesto, mm. 1-5

While these ostinati may not seem as musically interesting as the melodies layered over them, the performer must vigilantly observe the shape and effect of each ostinato. Especially in the latter example, the pianist should be careful not to allow the
ostinato to become stagnant. In this movement, the motion created by the ostinato is not in the notes—as it is in the example drawn from *Excursions*—but *between* the notes. The movement from one note to the next creates the tension that propels the movement forward. I recommend internally subdividing each beat into four units, which will allow the performer to visualize the motion of the ostinato pattern.

When playing Barber’s technically-demanding piano works, the pianist may quickly find herself lost in the thick texture and busy notation. Thus, as discussed above, the performer must take care to control the voicing, even within moments of complex cross-rhythms, so as to direct the listener’s ear. Furthermore, the performer should construct a large-scale aural image of the work, carefully pacing any dynamic build-ups in order to create compelling climaxes. An economical approach to the keyboard remains an important skill to be cultivated throughout many of Barber’s technically challenging works. Finally, the performer should sensitively shape ostinato bass lines to bring out the rhythmic character of the work.

**Eclecticism**

Although Barber’s music has been criticized for its use of nineteenth-century Romantic idioms, his works reveal much more than a mere reproduction of this past style. Indeed, Barber’s eclectic combination of common-practice-era techniques, such as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century formal structures and polyphonic textures, with twentieth-century devices, such as serialism and vernacular folk and dance idioms, gives his works their distinctive flavor.

Barber’s use of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century formal structures in particular remains remarkably consistent throughout his entire career. Barber’s preference for these
conventional structures is already apparent in his early works, most of which have a ternary structure. Of his mature works, the *Sonata for Piano* is modeled most clearly after the nineteenth-century four-movement sonata, with its sonata-allegro first movement, scherzo second movement, slow third movement, and the fast fourth movement. Most of the movements of *Souvenirs* and *Ballade* are in ternary forms. Barber’s connection to these forms was reinforced through the guidance of his teacher, Scalero, who also emphasized the Germanic tradition of counterpoint as well as form. Polyphonic texture prevails in nearly every piano work by Barber, though not always to the extent of the “Fuga” fourth movement of the *Sonata*.

The performer should be aware of the form Barber uses in each work. Such knowledge will not only provide an immediate understanding of certain elements of interpretation, but will also aid with memorization. However, one should note that Barber rarely repeats returning material verbatim, but rather alters each repeated section by embellishing the melody or changing the texture. In example 3.12, Barber introduces the melody straightforwardly. The A’ section, shown in example 3.13, begins with a counter-melody embellishing the main theme.
Polyphonic textures, like that shown in example 3.13, often appear in Barber’s music and demand great technical control on the part of the performer. One should spend time practicing each voice separately in this section: first, the waltz accompaniment; then, the main theme in the middle voice; and finally, the obbligato top voice. Make sure to
shape each voice and imagine different instruments playing them. In the orchestrated version of this work, strings play the melody and the woodwinds provide the countermelody. By putting the melody and the countermelody in distinctly different instrument families, Barber clearly sets apart the two lines. When performing the solo piano version, the performer should emulate this and color each line differently. The phrasing of this theme should match that of the first A section, and should sound graceful, not frantic.

There are several exceptions within Barber’s works, however, where the final A sections are almost identical to the first A sections; such works include the “Galop” of Souvenirs and the Ballade. Similarly, within the A sections of these pieces, the main theme is repeated multiple times. Such an emphasis on repetition provides the performer with an extra challenge, that of making each iteration interesting and compelling. For example, in the Ballade, the performer might play the initial A section with more directionality and the repeated A section in a more subdued style. As shown in example 3.14, the marking “Allargando poco a poco” appears at the same place in both A sections, the first allargando should not be exaggerated, so that the slowing down of the second A section remains effective.
Example 3.14: Barber, *Ballade*, Op. 46, mm. 81-89

The pianist might also experiment with highlighting different voices in both A sections, thus adding coloristic variety to the work. The descending tetrachord melody appears repeatedly throughout both A sections. The performer should emphasize the top melody at first. However, after establishing the figure it is appropriate to bring out different voices. At the *pp* starting at the pick-up to m. 61, shown in example 3.15, the performer could bring out the bass line to help with the sudden color change and to enhance the darkness of the sound.
Example 3.15: Barber, *Ballade*, Op. 46, mm. 57-62

![Music score](image)

Although conventional formal structures appear consistently throughout Barber’s output, the composer also experimented with twentieth-century idioms—especially serialism—in some of his mature works. In stark contrast to Webern, Babbitt, and other composers who based their entire compositions on serialism, Barber utilized twelve-tone rows intermittently for coloristic effects. Rows appear in both the first and third movements of the *Sonata for Piano*, as well as in *Nocturne*. In example 3.16, the right hand plays all twelve pitches within a single measure (m. 9), and then repeats these notes in the next measure an octave higher. The left hand here also consists of a twelve-tone row spanning two measures (mm. 9-10). However, most of this movement—except for a few moments—does not feature twelve-tone rows. The main theme of *Nocturne*, shown in example 3.17, comprises a twelve-tone row. The left hand, however, remains completely grounded in tonal harmony.
Melodies based on twelve-tone rows can be quite challenging to execute, technically and musically. While the rows may sound unfamiliar to many piano students, each occurs within what is primarily a tonal work, and thus Barber’s twelve-tone melodies tend to be goal-oriented, just like his tonal melodies. In example 3.16, the upper two voices ascend in preparation for the next phrase. The performer should gradually intensify this ascent by slightly increasing the speed and volume. In the Nocturne (example 3.17), on the other hand, the ascending sixteenth notes at m. 3 should be played lightly. John Browning describes these notes as “decorative” in contrast to the first five
notes, which should be stated “boldly and authoritatively.” Furthermore, the performer should be sensitive to the harmonic underpinnings, which can provide support and direction to these more challenging melodies.

Vernacular folk and dance idioms provide yet another aspect of variety to Barber’s piano output. The American folk flavors used in *Excursions* include boogie-woogie and blues styles, a traditional folk song, and a hoedown. Such recognizable folk influences allow *Excursions* to feel accessible for many audiences. Also, the sophisticated pianistic style of this set makes this work ideal for undergraduate piano majors eager for an introduction to twentieth-century piano literature. Despite the vernacular aspects, however, these pieces are not as easy to play as they seem: numerous rhythms and harmonies may be unfamiliar to classically-trained pianists.

Each movement of *Souvenirs* draws inspiration from a different ballroom dance, and thus, the performer should listen to original forms of these dances before learning Barber’s renditions. Listening to the schottische, a country dance from Bohemia, before turning to Barber’s “Schottische” in *Souvenirs* provides certain insights into how one might approach Barber’s dance-like movement. The light, relaxed nature of the schottische seems easier to grasp from listening to the dance; once this sense for the dance becomes clear, the pianist will more easily retain the desired character even while learning Barber’s “Schottische.” Similarly, if one is unfamiliar with hoedowns and banjo music, listening to such sounds before learning the final movement of *Excursions* may help the performer to grasp the color and character of this movement.

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8 Browning, 21.
Because Barber adopted and integrated a multiplicity of styles within his compositions, the performer requires a broad view of the composer’s musical sources and influences—from Baroque counterpoint to Classical formal structures, from nineteenth-century Romantic lyricism to twentieth-century serialism, from American folk idioms to ballroom dances. Only when the pianist fully understands the variety of styles at work in Barber’s compositional language will performances of Barber’s piano works become convincing.

Throughout this guide to performance, I have shared my insights into Barber’s piano works—insights gleaned through my own experience of performing and recording his entire body of compositions for the piano—in the hopes that, both by highlighting Barber’s compositional appeal and by suggesting techniques for approaching these works, more piano students might be able to engage with one of the twentieth century’s most fascinating composers. As I have discussed within the preceding chapters, Barber’s lyricism, virtuosity, and eclecticism continue to draw pianists and audiences alike to his works; at the same time, these three facets of his style present certain challenges to the pianist, which I have addressed with examples drawn from especially relevant passages. My survey of the entirety of Barber’s piano works—early and mature—reveals a consistent use of lyricism throughout his career. Recordings of Barber accompanying Leontyne Price offer the solo pianist important examples of how to perform such lyrical melodies: Barber’s carefully controlled accompaniments support the melody, allowing the voice to move freely, while continuing to provide a harmonic foundation and a variety of coloristic effects. As I have suggested, pianists should focus on technical precision and an economical approach to physical movement when playing the virtuosic
passages that arise in many of Barber’s piano works. Finally, Barber’s eclectic stylistic allusions require the pianist to develop a broad understanding of diverse musical genres.

One of the most important aspects of my project has been to bring Barber’s early piano works—written with his characteristic lyricism, though in a more simple manner—into the standard repertoire, especially of less advanced pianists. While the scope of this document did not permit a detailed examination of each of these works, further research of these works will certainly enrich our understanding of Barber’s compositional development and style. Furthermore, the revised Schirmer edition of Barber’s complete piano works includes counterpoint exercises the composer wrote as a student. While I did not include these studies in my project, research into these early compositions may benefit scholars and performers alike.

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**Discography**


