ON 5 NOVEMBER 1938 TOSCANINI CONDUCTED Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings in a broadcast that made Barber famous across America. He was 28. When he died, on 23 January 1981, Barber felt himself to have been bypassed by the musical establishment. Self-confidence had never been one of his strong points, and the continued jibes of the critics, along with the failure of his grand opera *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1966, had gradually convinced him that his music was no longer wanted. In the late 1980s and 1990s came the cultural thaw that has ended the stranglehold of puritan modernism on musical life. It has brought a re-assessment of many "traditional" composers who, like Barber, had previously been judged passé but who can now be seen for their true worth. Barber turns out to be one of the century's supreme lyricists - and closer examination of the music itself reveals that he was very much aware of contemporary developments. Twelve-tone procedures can be found in much of his output, for example, including several of the piano works - but, like Frank Martin, he understood that the disruptive power of dodecaphony would be more effective within a generally tonal framework.

Barber was a fluent pianist and the instrument was part of his life: his friends reported that he always spent an hour every day at the keyboard, playing Bach. It may appear surprising, then, that he composed so little piano music: there are only four original works from his maturity. But Barber was never a fluent composer: his self-criticism was such that his output in any medium was bound to be small. His Op. 1, the *Serenade for Strings* was completed in December 1928: fifty years later, he began the *Canzonetta* for oboe and strings that was to be his last work, his Op. 48 - which is less than one published work a year. Among his unpublished works, by contrast, there are 24 piano pieces, yet all but one of these are from his childhood and earliest maturity, and all are brief miniatures.

Barber's first compositions date from 1917, when he was seven, the earliest of all being a piano piece, Sadness; and a handful of other small pieces (with evocative titles like *War Song*, *At Twilight and Lullaby*) survive from before 1924, when he entered the Curtis School of Music in Philadelphia. That was the year in which - grandly signing himself "Samuel O. Barber 2nd" - he published the *Three Sketches*. The first, a "*Love Song*" dedicated "*To Mother*" and dated "April, 1924" is in a languid *Tempo di Valse Allegretto* and reveals that the young composer already had a taste for the lyrical chromaticism that was to be a mark of his mature style. The dedication to his mother might hint at mawkish sentiment; the second Sketch, ironically entitled "*To My Steinway*" and dedicated "To No. 220601" suggests otherwise. It's a brief *Adagio* in waltz-time which gently explores the range of the keyboard; it bears the date "June, 1923". The winsome Minuet which closes the Three Sketches is earlier yet (April 1923) and is dedicated to Barber's sister Sara; for its central section it cheekily steals a theme From Beethoven' Minuet No. 2, WoO 10.

Barber's tongue was in his cheek when he wrote the (unpublished) two-piece suite *Fresh From West Chester (Some Jazzings)* in July 1925. The first is called "Poison Ivy" and carries an explanatory note: "A country-dance that isn't. Accredited to, and blamed on T.T. Garborinsky", the music itself barely lives up to its tempo indication or "Laughingly and briskly". The other piece, "Let's Sit it Out; I'd Rather Watch - A Walls", is likewise strewn with clumsy attempts at verbal humour which echo the kind of performance indications found in Ives ("flirtatiously" - molto koketto", "with gushing"), although Barbara Heyman, author of the standard biography of Barber (*Samuel Barber : The Composer and his Music*, Oxford University Press, 1992), thinks that he had not yet seen any of Ives' scores and in 1979 he told Phillip Ramey: "I can't bear Ives". Instead, "*Let's Sit it Out*" is more important for the occasional glilmpse of a thumbprint of his mature style.

The two *Interludes* date from 1931 and 1932, when Barber was studying with Rosero Scalero at the Curtis Institute. *Interlude I*, dedicated to Jeanne Behrend, was not published until 1993; *Interlude II* remains in manuscript. Both were premiered by the composer in a student's concert in May 1932. That Barber chose not to have these works published even though his "official" series of works had already begun suggests that he was dissatisfied with them perhaps because of the obvious influence of Brahms, the Brahms of the late *Intermezzi* in the first *Interlude*, he of the Op. 79 *Rhapsodies* in the second. Heyman points out the Brahmsian characteristics: "polyrhythmic passages (two against three), hemiola rhythms, syncopated chordal passages divided with wide separation between two hands, pedal points on broken octaves and tenths, and exploration of the extreme registers of the piano". That said, it is Brahms seen through Barber's eyes, for these are the first two piano pieces by Barber that are unmistakably his.

Interiude I opens in E flat major, *Adagio ma non troppo*, with a rocking pedal point on a thirteenth, over which the thumb of the left hand picks up the inner voice and the right hand traces a widely spaced melodic line in contrary motion, first in single notes, then in increasingly complex chords. The middle section, *Molto più mosso*, in C minor, leads to a false recapitulation in F minor, in which the rocking pedal is transferred to the right hand, before B flat minor is restored and the pedal replaced in its rightful position. *Inter!ude II* is a pianistic *tour de force*, marked *Allegro molto agitato*. It is in ternary form, opening and closing in G minor, the central section is marked *più mosso e leggero* but its continued development of the material already presented in the opening passage means that the tension never really lets up.

With the *Four Excursions*, Op. 20, of 1942-44, we are on more familiar territory. This was Barber's first and only piece of Americana, perhaps in response to the recent success of Copland's ballet *Billy the Kid*. Barber made no wild claims for the work: "These are 'Excursions' in small classical forms into regional American folk idioms. Their rhythmic characteristics, as well as their source in folk material and in their scoring, reminiscent of local instruments, are easily recognised". The first *Excursion*, composed in 1942 and first performed by Barber's close friend Jeanne Behrend in a radio broadcast in May 1944, is written with a boogie-woogie waiking bass. The second and fourth a lazy, melancholy blues that respects the twelve-bar structure and other conventions of its model, and a hoe-down using only tonic and subdominant harmonies to suggest the limited resources of the mouth organ or barnyard fiddle - date from late spring 1944. And the third, the last to be composed, in September 1944, is a brief set of fantasy-variations on "The Streets of Laredo" with echoes of Latin American dance music (coincidentally, Roy Harris used the same tune to open his *American Ballads* for piano, composed at almost exactly the same time).

The first performance of first three *Excursions* to be written was given by Vladimir Horowitz in March 1945 in Carnegie Hall. The collaboration with Horowitz was to prove important, for it was he who gave the premiere of Barber's Piano Sonata, Op. 26, five years later. Sa proprietorial was Horowitz's interest in the work as it was being composed that it is generally imagined that the commission came from him. Not so: it was Irving Berlin and Richard Rodgers who ordered the *Sonata* to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the League of Composers, though Barber almost certainly composed it with Horowitz in mind. Barber began work with relish, quickly finishing the first of what he imagined would be its three movements, including a slow finale. But he swiftly ran into trouble as his eternal self-doubt set in. Horowitz had programmed the premiere for 1948-49 season but had to postpone it. By April 1949 Barber had completed three movements but was stuck over the concluding fugue. In a radio broadcast in 1978 he explained how the blockage was overcome: "Mrs Horowitz called me up and said: the trouble with you is you're *stitico* - it means constipated – 'that's what you are, a constipated composer'. That made me so mad that I ran out of my studio and wrote that [fugue] in the next day".

Horowitz gave the first public performance in Havana in December 1949: the first US public performance took place in Constitution Hall in Washington DC a month afterwards. The critics went wild: "one or the most musically exciting and technically brilliant pieces of writing yet turned out by an American": "the first sonata really come of age by an American composer of this period": "the instrument has not been exploited in like manner by any twentieth-century composer". Horowitz continued to perform the *Sonata* across America, it was released on LP before the end of that year and, rightly, has continued to be Barber's most popular work after the *Adagio for Strings*.

The *Sonata* gives lie to anyone who still considers Barber a hapless Romantic mired in the past. The formal design may be traditional; what happens within it is not. The opening movement (*Allegro energico - Un poco meno mosso – Tempo 1°*), more or less in sonata form, opens in a E flat minor that is constantly unsettled by chromaticism and fails to establish itself until the coda; and much of thematic material is constructed from that most chromatic of intervals, the semitone. The brief rondo-sherzo (it is over in barely two minutes) is marked *Allegro vivace e leggero* and serves as light relief before the *Adagio mesto* third movement - a passacaglia in all but name, over a bass that contains all twelve notes of the scale (dodecaphonic process is present at many points in the work). The toccata-like fugue that Mrs. Horowitz's insult provoked is fantastically difficult to bring off adequately. In four voices, it mixes the standard devices of the traditional fugue with jazz-like syncopations and "blue-note" harmonies and provides a barnstorming climax to one of the century's finest keyboard works.

The brief *Nocturne*, Op. 33, was composed in 1959 as "an homage to John Field". John Browning, who gave its first performance later that year and who, in 1962, premiered Barber's Piano Concerto, wrote more recently that "I think Sam was paying tribute, not so much to Field as to Chopin […]. I doubt that Sam loved Field's music the way he loved Chopin's". Other writers agree: James Siffernan points out the ternary (ABA) form was commoner with Chopin than with Field, drawing attention also to the rhythmic freedom of the embellishments or the melodic line. That melodic line, over arpeggiated figures in the left hand, is indeed unsettled, chromatically as much as rhythmically; and Barber again uses twelve-note rows, both in the outer sections as in the more agitated central passage, thus loosening the tonal framework in the listener's ear.

After The Concert is a delicate miniature in 3/4, again in ternary form, the outer sections, a wistful waltz in A major, surrounding a passage in A minor that at times sounds almost like an English folksong. In the catalogue at the end of her book, Barbara Heyman dates *After The Concert* "ca 1973", though she doesn't discuss the work itself; it first appeared in print in a collection of Barber's piano music published by Schirmer in 1993 - but there, too, nothing else is revealed about this bashful piece. One might first imagine it perhaps to be one of the juvenilia; closer inspection of the music itself reveals a harmonic sophistication that would seem to confirm its late date.

Barber's last work for piano - indeed, his penultimate completed work - was the Ballade, Op. 46. It was commissioned for the fifth Van Cliburn Competition in 1977, at a time when, in Barbara Heyman words, "Barber's morale was at its lowest" although later he gleefully told Phillip Ramey that he accepted the commission "only when they agreed I should get twice the amount Aaron Copland got for writing a piece" (Barber was paid $6,000). The combination of depression with his unremitting self-criticism meant that it took him nearly nine months to finish this six-minute piece. Like the *Nocturne*, the *Ballade* is in ABA form but is even more concise : the entire work is based on the four-note descending phrase that is heard immediately. The opening section, marked "Restless", begins in C-minor but the opening phrase is answered in A minor, with the right-hand triads lagging marginally behind the left-hand support to increase the sensation of disjointedness. Tension builds up very swiftly to bring in the central passage, as angry and intolerant as anything he wrote, before subsiding as suddenly to allow the opening material to return. It ends, as Barber's life did, in unemphatic, quiet pain.

MARTIN ANDERSON