



Samuel Barber

Born March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Died January 23, 1981, New York City.

Violin Concerto, Op. 14

This is not the first violin concerto to have been declared unplayable by the person for whom it was written. Tchaikovsky's now-popular concerto also was rejected at first—although Leopold Auer, Tchaikovsky's chosen soloist and a violinist of considerable accomplishment, eventually had the decency to admit his error (and later taught the work to his pupil Jascha Heifetz, who regularly played it). Barber was not so lucky, although time has proved the value of his work.

In 1939, Barber accepted a commission from Samuel Fels, a Philadelphia businessman (and the manufacturer of Fels Naphtha soap) who wanted a violin concerto for his adopted son, Iso Briselli, a child prodigy. (Briselli was born in Odessa, the birthplace of so many violinists including David and Igor

Oistrakh and Nathan Milstein.) Fels offered Barber \$1,000—\$500 up front, \$500 on completion of the score. For a composer at the beginning of his career, it was without doubt a good deal. Or so it seemed at the time.

Barber wrote the first two movements that summer in Switzerland, but when Briselli saw them he complained that the music was “too simple and not brilliant enough for a concerto.” There are conflicting accounts of what happened next. According to the “official” story, dutifully repeated in program notes for years, Barber wrote a dazzling *perpetuum mobile* finale, which Briselli declared too difficult; Fels then asked for his money back, and Barber set up a performance to demonstrate that the movement was indeed playable—and that he needn't repay the \$500, which

COMPOSED

1939–40

FIRST PERFORMANCE

February 7, 1941,
Philadelphia

FIRST CSO PERFORMANCES

July 30, 1960, Ravinia
Festival. Jaime
Laredo, violin; Walter
Susskind conducting

April 9, 1981, Orchestra
Hall. Jaime Laredo, violin;
Leonard Slatkin conducting

MOST RECENT CSO PERFORMANCES

June 3, 2000, Orchestra
Hall. Itzhak Perlman, violin;
Charles Dutoit conducting

July 25, 2012, Ravinia
Festival. Joshua Bell, violin;
James Conlon conducting

INSTRUMENTATION

solo violin, two flutes and
piccolo, two oboes, two
clarinets, two bassoons,
two horns, two trumpets,
timpani, snare drum, piano,
strings

APPROXIMATE PERFORMANCE TIME

25 minutes

was already long spent. But in 1982, Briselli, who had, no doubt sensibly, given up the violin to run the Fels business, told his version of the story to Barbara Heyman, then at work on her definitive Barber biography. Briselli claimed that he had merely informed Barber that he feared the finale was “too lightweight” compared to the first two movements.

Nonetheless, a demonstration was set up to convince Fels that his money had been well spent. This took place at the Curtis Institute (where, not incidentally, Fels served on the board of trustees) in the fall



Violinist Albert Spalding

of 1939, before Barber had even put the finishing touches on the concerto. Herbert Baumel, a gifted Curtis student, learned the finale from Barber’s manuscript in just two hours and played it in the studio of Josef Hofmann, the distinguished Curtis director, before a “jury” that included Mary Louise Curtis Bok, the founder of the Curtis Institute, along with Hofmann, Barber, and Barber’s close friend Gian Carlo Menotti. According to Heyman, all parties immediately

agreed “that Barber was to be paid the full commission and Briselli had to relinquish his right to the first performance.” (Briselli was not present.)

Now Barber was free to find a new soloist for Fels’s commission. (Barber took to calling it his *concerto da sapone*, or soap concerto, although it was becoming more of a soap opera.) And so the honor of introducing this now-beloved concerto fell to Albert Spalding, a little-known violinist whose name has a secure place in the history of American music as a result. (Eugene Ormandy conducted the premiere, with the Philadelphia Orchestra, in 1941.)

What regularly gets lost in the story of this concerto’s difficult genesis is the music itself, as direct and persuasive as anything Barber wrote. The concerto opens with one of Barber’s most inspired ideas, a warm and expansive theme stated at once by the solo violin. The entire Allegro is like a grand, reflective aria (even in much of his instrumental music, Barber is often a “vocal” composer) with intermittent dramatic episodes, but one in which unabashedly romantic, tonal melody reigns. The Andante, in the elegiac vein of the Adagio for Strings, opens with a poignant oboe solo, which the violin ultimately cannot resist. (In 1948, Barber changed the tempo marking of the first movement from Allegro molto moderato to a less relaxed Allegro, so that the concerto would not appear to open with two slow movements.) The controversial

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finale is neither lightweight nor unplayable, although its brilliance is not of the more predictably heroic, fireworks variety.

A few footnotes. Herbert Baumel, the young Curtis student whose playing “testified” on Barber’s behalf, substituted for Spalding at the first rehearsal for the premiere and so impressed Ormandy that he was offered a permanent position in the Philadelphia Orchestra.

When Mary Louise Curtis Bok commissioned Barber to write a work for the dedication of the new organ at the Philadelphia Academy of Music in 1960, he refused to accept the fee (reportedly \$2,000), because of his longtime gratitude to her, and his admiration for her motto: “for quality of the work rather than quick, showy results.”

And finally, Barber eventually did get the remaining \$500 Fels owed him. ■