

SAMUEL BARBER (1910 - 1981) STRING QUARTET OPUS.11

Molto Allegro e Appassionata
Adagio
Molto Adagio-Presto

In May 1936, Barber wrote to his friend *Orlando Cole* (cellist of the *Curtis Quartet*) saying 'I have vague quartettish rumblings in my innards ...' but as he was about to find out, writing a quartet is difficult and challenging form of chamber music and progress was slow once he began in the Italian Alps that summer.

Further correspondence to *Cole* read '... I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today - it's a knockout!' How true that statement was. Barber himself arranged this beautiful slow movement for string orchestra and the famous 'Adagio for Strings' was born. He submitted the score to the infamous conductor *Toscani*, who then returned the score without comment, much to Barber's disappointment. Only later did he learn that the maestro had been so impressed that he had memorised the entire work and conducted the first performance in November 1938. The *Adagio* remains a classic favourite with audience and performers alike and also used in various film soundtracks most notably 'Platoon'.

The first performance was given in Rome by the *Pro Arte Quartet* in December 1936, but Barber was dissatisfied with the last movement and withdrew it for revision. Another performance followed at the Library of Congress in April 1937 but again the piece was withdrawn by the composer and the quartet did not reach its final version until January 1943 when the *Budapest Quartet* performed it in *Washington D.C.*

The quartet in B minor has a concise structure with a rounded cyclic form of A-B-A and as a whole, the quartet portrays Barber's struggle to complete the piece with its restless themes and yearning character. The opening dramatic unison of the first movement grabs the attention of the listener almost like a fanfare and the musical journey swiftly begins. The second theme is a calmer, lyrical section like a chorale and the development of the two themes are continuous until the end.

The well known Adagio is built on a single melodic idea (very chant-like) accompanied by very static chords opening to a heart wrenching climax of great intensity followed by the most exquisite progression of chords with a peaceful ending in a major key - perhaps Barber is leaving us with a feeling of hope?

The final version of the third movement is built from what were originally the last fifty-two bars of the first movement, hence the cyclic form of the quartet. It serves the purpose of summing up the emotions of the previous movements using very concise musical language but still creating real drama in the music with a ferocious ending leaving performer and listener almost breathless.