



AMERICAN CLASSICS

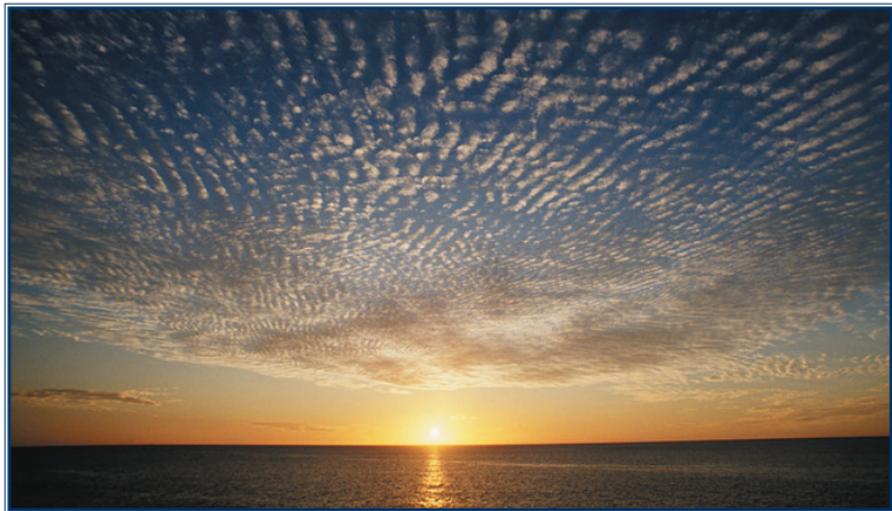


# SAMUEL BARBER

## Capricorn Concerto

**A Hand of Bridge • Intermezzo from Vanessa**

**Stéphane Rancourt, Oboe • Karen Jones, Flute • John Gracie, Trumpet**  
**Royal Scottish National Orchestra • Marin Alsop**



## Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

### Capricorn Concerto • A Hand of Bridge • Intermezzo from Vanessa

Born and raised in Westchester, an upscale suburb of New York City, in 1910, Samuel Barber was something of a phenomenon, a true musical prodigy. He studied somewhat cursorily with his uncle, the composer Sidney Homer, but, even at a precociously early age, Barber was a natural born musician: he could sing beautifully, play the piano, and began composing when he was eight years old, a year after he began to play the pipe organ with enough proficiency to accompany services. The year was 1918, and his opus one was, appropriately enough, *War Song*, for solo piano, a piece favoured by a Bach-style cross relation dissonance of a C sharp on a C natural, the sort of harmonic “crunch” which would eventually become a benchmark of Barber’s style.

When eventually Barber enrolled in the Curtis Institute, where he was a member of the founding class, he was the single best and brightest student; his skills at the piano were remarkable, his singing voice angelic and rich (a sombre baritone which has been captured on record singing his own *Dover Beach*) and his compositions downright sophisticated. His classmates jokingly referred to the “three B’s” of classical music: Bach, Beethoven and Barber. His refined technique and very personal style would go on to make him one of the most important composers of his day, even as high modernism took hold not only of the academies (all seemed either to follow Boulez or rue the consequences in those chaotic times) but of the concert platform as well. Barber, though his music was much beloved (and not just the *Adagio for Strings*), would bear the mantle of *recherche*, slightly backwards. The end of his life was rather sad, when, after the failure on a grand scale of his opera *Antony and Cleopatra* (composed to open the new Metropolitan Opera house, and riddled with enough disasters to make for interesting reading), Barber all but disappeared, composing little save a few songs and dying more sad and overlooked than a genius of his stature deserved.

During World War II, Barber served in the military, though his musical talent was well known; he was even called, by *Newsweek*, “...the most outstanding American serious composer in uniform”, and he had several fellow officers lobbying on his behalf that he be granted a post which allowed him more space to work. He wanted nothing more than to return to his routine of composition, and was ultimately granted a more permissive line of service which enabled him to return to his longtime companion Gian-Carlo Menotti, whom he met in his Curtis days, and to Capricorn, his wonderful hearth and home, so named for the fantastic light it got during the winter. It was there and then he wrote his *Capricorn Concerto*, scored for the same instruments as Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto No 2*, solo trumpet, oboe, flute, with an accompanying string complement.

The music itself is something of a departure for Barber, bandying between playful, insistent baroque textures and a more lyrical, more melodically driven composition, though Barber is still Barber, a melodist and a modernist alike. Allegedly each member of the Capricorn household, Barber, Menotti, and Chip, Menotti’s adopted son, is represented with their own individual theme, thematically depicting each of their personalities. The first movement flits between two tempi, *Allegro* (fast) and *Andante con moto* (walking speed, but with motion), and is cast in a rondo form, with development being the driving force, Barber’s spotless compositional technique on full display. The second movement is playful, save for one tranquil passage, favoured by a boisterous line for plucked viola, while the final movement, Barber’s most direct homage to Bach, features a trumpet fanfare in its spirited midst.

In 1958 Menotti founded the still-extant Spoleto festival, an annual event taking place in his home country of Italy, and liked to present, Cabaret style, a programme called *Album Leaves*, wherein artists of varying stripes presented short pieces (or poems or

plays) composed for the occasion, the most notable of which is Barber's *A Hand of Bridge*, a nine minute bitchy witty "opera" with a libretto by Menotti. In this short piece, scored for four soloists and chamber orchestra, are biographical references to members of the Barber-Menotti intimate circle, a trick Menotti employs in many of his libretti. The story is a quick psychodrama, with the four characters both playing bridge with one another and playing out, in their minds, what they think of the others at the table. Barber cleverly uses dry recitative style to set the literal moments of card-play, pitting them against lush, quasi-arias to outline their inner thoughts. Their friends Chuck Turner, Thomas Schippers, and Christopher, Barber's nephew, do not escape the knife of the satire, and Barber, in his most vulgar mode, does not shy away from "jazzy" swung rhythms or overly psychological music, all demanded by the short but cutting drama.

In the last years of his life, Barber went reclusive, hiding out in his Upper East Side apartment, writing small pieces for nobody in particular, his relationship with Menotti long a thing of the past, his opera a colossal disaster, and his orchestral pieces getting less and less play. Though commissions were offered, he was reluctant to accept, not wanting to bind himself to anything, and more than likely sick of the rat race of the day. But he did manage to write some wonderful pieces simply for the joy of composing, including the subdued *Mutations from Bach* (sometimes called *Meditations on a theme from Bach*), a sombre work for four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba and timpani. Here he pays homage to a composer to whom he always felt very close: the plainsong *Christ, thou lamb of God* is played four times, in four different versions from history, presented chronologically. The earliest is a harmonization, which Barber, of course, scored for this brass ensemble, from 1604 by Joachim Decker, the second is Bach's, taken from *Cantata 23*, followed by a version Bach reworked into a complex fugue in an organ prelude, the third is Barber's own, making use of a muted trumpet, and the final returns to Decker's own.

The piece was not intended to be for any group, occasion, or specific performance. Rather was it something that no doubt brewed in Barber's head for some time, a tribute, at the end of his life, to his favourite composer.

The Metropolitan Opera in New York City had been after Barber for some time to make a big opera for their company, but for various reasons (mostly unsuitable libretti) he declined. When he accepted, he wanted to make (with Menotti) a truly "American" work, but settled on something a little more European—a wholly original work called *Vanessa*. The story itself, of a woman whose lover returns to her snowy abode after years of absence and then promptly falls in love with her daughter, is tonally rooted in Isak Dannisen's *Seven Gothic Tales*, but it was Menotti and Barber who collectively dreamed it up. At the height of the pathos-ridden action in the third (and final) act of *Vanessa* lies the intermezzo – a plangent-yet-energetic orchestral interlude, perhaps depicting the passage of the two weeks that happens between the preceding and following scenes. In context, it depicts Vanessa, the elder, spurned woman; as an orchestral extract, it is haunting and gorgeous, tense and easygoing, as beautiful an orchestral *fantasia* as Barber ever wrote.

In the years following Barber's catastrophic opera *Antony and Cleopatra*, his second commission from the Metropolitan Opera, Barber was more of a reluctant composer. He sank into a depression, into an alcoholic despair, only rising sporadically to write a piece. One of these, *Fadograph of a Yestern Scene*, is a single-pannelled orchestral work. The title comes from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, one of Barber's favourite books, but the music comes more out of Debussy than any of his other works, slow, impressionistic washes of sound, large forces yet a spare texture. The Pittsburgh Symphony commissioned it, and it was the last orchestral work of any scope Barber wrote.

As Barber was dying, he was trying to complete a concerto for oboe and orchestra, requested from him by Harold Gomberg, who played in the New York

Philharmonic. Originally Barber envisioned a multi-movement work, but as he knew he would not live to finish it, he settled on a single movement, a *Canzonetta*—and he did not quite live even to finish this; Charles Turner, Barber's only student, took up the task of completing it. "In its limited way", writes Barbara Heyman, Barber's biographer, "the *Canzonetta* offers an appropriate elegy to the conclusion of Barber's career". The tonality of the work embraces every device

Barber loved, from late Romanticism to the more astringent modernist sounds, and his "vocal" writing for the oboe betrays his deep, lifelong affinity for the voice. This final work is almost a winnowing down of Barber's total musical self, a beautiful, intimate, quiet final offering.

**Daniel Felsenfeld**

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## **Stéphane Rancourt**

Stéphane Rancourt was born in Quebec in 1967. He studied in Canada with Jacques Simard at the Conservatoire de Musique de Québec, and in Europe with Thomas Indermuhle at the Rotterdam Konservatorium, and the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Karlsruhe. In Canada he was the first oboist to win the Sylva Gelber Award and also, won the 1991 Prix d'Europe. He has performed in most European countries as well as South America, Russia, Canada, Japan and Australia. During the years 1995 to 2003, he was Principal Oboe with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra with which he regularly performed as a soloist, making with the orchestra his first Naxos recording, Alan Rawsthorne's *Oboe Concerto* (8.554763), which was nominated for a Gramophone Award. He is a member of Paragon Ensemble Scotland which specialises in contemporary music, a founding member of the Commonwealth Chamber Ensemble, and Professor at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. Since 2003 he has held the position of Principal Oboe in Manchester, with the Hallé Orchestra.

## **Karen Jones**

Karen Jones is renowned as one of the most gifted flautists in the country. As a guest principal or soloist she has performed with virtually every professional orchestra in Great Britain. After studying in London, Vienna and New York, she became principal flute of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, a post she held for 5 years before returning to London. Since then she has been constantly in demand by orchestras, chamber groups and studios. Karen Jones is a professor at the Royal Academy of Music as well as a consultant at the music colleges in Cardiff and Birmingham. She is currently principal flute with the City of London Sinfonia with which she also appears as soloist.

## **John Gracie**

Following studies at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music & Drama and at the Guildhall School of Music, John Gracie joined the BBC Training Orchestra in Bristol. In 1971 he was appointed Principal Trumpet with the Ulster Orchestra and in 1973 he joined the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra in Manchester under Bryden Thomson, where he was promoted to Principal Trumpet in 1977. During this time he played regularly with the Halle, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestras. John Gracie returned to Scotland to take up his present position as Principal Trumpet in the RSNO, which he has held for the last 23 years. He is currently Professor of Trumpet at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music, and a member of the Paragon Ensemble, Chamber Group of Scotland, and the RSNO Brass Ensemble. He appears regularly as a soloist with the RSNO and as Guest Principal Trumpet with the London Orchestras.

## Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra, in 1951 the ensemble, now full-time, took the name of the Scottish National Orchestra, later assuming the title Royal, a recognition of its importance in the musical life of Scotland. Distinguished conductors who have worked with the orchestra include Sir John Barbirolli, Karl Rankl, Hans Swarowsky, Walter Susskind, Sir Alexander Gibson, the first Scottish-born Principal Conductor, Bryden Thomson and Neeme Järvi. Walter Weller, now Conductor Emeritus, served as Music Director and Principal Conductor from 1992 to 1997, when he was succeeded by Alexander Lazarev. The Principal Guest Conductor is Garry Walker and Stéphane Denève has been appointed Music Director from 2005. The orchestra made an important contribution to the authoritative Naxos series of Bruckner Symphonies under the late Georg Tintner, and under their former Principal Guest Conductor Marin Alsop recorded a complete cycle of the orchestral works of Samuel Barber. There have also been significant additions to the stock of recordings of film music, with award-winning releases in London and in Germany. A busy schedule in Scotland brings regular seasons in its home-town of Glasgow, annual appearances at the Edinburgh Festival and regular performances at the BBC Promenade Concerts in London. In addition to concerts in England, the orchestra has travelled to other countries, with tours of North America and Japan, and throughout Europe. In 2002 the orchestra was given a Classic FM 'Red F' award for its outstanding contribution to classical music, through recording, performance, education and outreach work.

## Marin Alsop

Principal Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra since Autumn 2002, Marin Alsop won the Royal Philharmonic Society Conductor of 2002 award and was Gramophone's Artist of the Year 2003. Regular guest appearances include the Chicago Symphony, Philadelphia Orchestra, New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics, London Symphony and London Philharmonic, and in October 2004 she made her debut with the Munich Philharmonic. Marin Alsop studied at Yale and at the Juilliard School and won the Koussevitzky Prize at Tanglewood, where she was a pupil of Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa, and Gustav Meier. Marin Alsop's Naxos discography thus far includes a highly acclaimed Barber cycle with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Tchaikovsky 4 with the Colorado Symphony, and the first in her series of recordings with the Bournemouth Symphony: Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, *On the Town* and *On the Waterfront*.

8.559135

BARBER: Capricorn Concerto

NAXOS

Playing  
Time:  
52:28

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NAXOS

# Samuel BARBER

(1910-1981)

## Capricorn Concerto \* †

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|---|--|-------|
| 1 | <b>Allegro ma non troppo</b>                 | 14:08 |
| 2 | <b>Allegretto</b>                            | 6:28  |
| 3 | <b>Allegro con brio</b>                      | 3:01  |
| 4 | <b>A Hand of Bridge §</b>                    | 4:40  |
| 5 | <b>Mutations from Bach</b>                   | 9:44  |
| 6 | <b>Intermezzo from Vanessa</b>               | 5:43  |
| 7 | <b>Canzonetta for oboe<br/>and strings *</b> | 4:26  |
| 8 | <b>Fadograph of a Yestern Scene</b>          | 8:46  |
|   |  | 9:40  |

## Stéphane Rancourt, Oboe \*

John Gracie, Trumpet † • Karen Jones, Flute †

Lesley Craigie, Soprano § • Roderick Williams, Bass §

Louise Winter, Mezzo-Soprano § • Simon Wall, Tenor §

## Royal Scottish National Orchestra Marin Alsop

Recorded at Henry Wood Hall, Glasgow, on 12th May 2000 (8), 27th October 2002 (6-7) and 9th February, 2003 (1-5)

Producers: Phil Rowlands (1-5) and Andrew Walton (K&A Productions Ltd.) (6-8) • Engineers: Ben Conellan (1-5), Mike Clements (6-7) and Tony Faulkner (8)

Post-production: Emma Stocker and Andrew Walton  
Recorded and edited at 24bit resolution

Publishers: G. Schirmer, Inc. • Booklet Notes: Daniel Felsenfeld

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by Mark Downey (Getty Images)

American flag, folk artist, 1880s



AMERICAN CLASSICS

This is the sixth and final volume in the acclaimed Naxos series of the complete orchestral works of Samuel Barber conducted by Marin Alsop. The *Capricorn Concerto*, named after Barber's beloved home at Mount Kisco, is a jewel-like triple concerto (scored for the same instruments as Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2*, solo trumpet, oboe, flute, with an accompanying string complement), full of rhythm, movement and light. The *Intermezzo* from Barber's second opera *Vanessa* is a haunting and gorgeous orchestral fantasia, as beautiful a work as he ever wrote. The *Canzonetta*, his last work, is from an unfinished Oboe Concerto.

Booklet notes in English

www.naxos.com



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BARBER: Capricorn Concerto

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