

Samuel Barber — *Violin Concerto*

Featuring Yesong Sophie Lee, Violin

In 1939, Samuel Barber was suddenly the talk of American arts. The year prior, his Adagio for Strings—written when the composer was just 26 years old—had been premiered under the baton of legendary conductor and tastemaker Arturo Toscanini. The short piece would soon become one of the most widely performed American works for orchestra, and Barber was riding high.

That's when the young composer was approached by Samuel Fels, a wealthy soap magnate from Philadelphia. Fels commissioned Barber to write a Violin Concerto, with the intent that the new work would be premiered by Fels' adopted son, Iso Briselli.

Barber penned the first two movements over the summer and presented them to Briselli, who initially received them enthusiastically. But when the violinist showed the music to his coach, the teacher was irate, saying that the solo parts were not showy enough. The problems only amplified when Barber delivered the third movement, which Briselli and his coach rejected as unplayably difficult and stylistically disconnected from the first two movements. Barber ultimately refunded half of Fels' commission fee, and the concerto was premiered by a different violinist in 1941.

It has since become Barber's most oft-performed work next to the Adagio for Strings, and one of the core staples of the concerto repertoire.

Barber sets a serene mood from the concerto's first notes, with the soloist playing a melody that will carry forward as a theme throughout the first movement. The composer's youthful preference for Romantic-style lushness is on full display here and carries over into the second movement—a gorgeous, slow piece in which a lyrical oboe solo gives way to a contrasting solo for the violin that rises to powerful heights before settling back into tranquility.

Then comes that “unplayable” third movement—a racing, swirling piece in which the violinist barely stops for breath from first note to last. The orchestra urges the soloist on with splashy interjections until it all concludes with a final punch on an exuberant A-minor chord.