

**Samuel Barber** (b. West Chester, PA, March 9, 1910; d. New York, NY, January 23, 1981)

**String Quartet, op. 11 (1936)**

**Composed:** 1936

**Approximate duration:** 16 minutes

Since accompanying the radio announcement of President Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945, Samuel Barber's *Adagio* for Strings has stood as arguably the most iconic work of American classical repertoire. As a compositional feat, the *Adagio* is nothing short of a minor miracle: melodically and harmonically concise, emotionally devastating. It epitomizes the fervent lyricism and expressive immediacy that have established Barber among the twentieth century's most venerated American musical figures.

While frequently performed in Barber's version for string orchestra, the *Adagio* less often appears in its original form, as the second movement (marked *Molto adagio*) of his String Quartet, op. 11, composed in 1936. (Barber, *nota bene*, recognized what he had accomplished; on September 19 of that year, he wrote to the cellist Orlando Cole, "I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout! Now for a Finale.") Yet its presentation in the context of the three-movement Quartet affords the listener a special opportunity.

Played by just two violins, viola, and cello, the *Adagio*'s breathless lines burn with an intimate intensity muted by the quiet army of orchestral strings. Furthermore, framed by the Quartet's outer movements—the angular *Molto allegro e appassionato*, and the concluding reprise of the first movement's material—the ubiquitous slow movement takes on a more nuanced significance.

For prefaced by the angular dissonance of the opening movement, the *Adagio* emerges as a response to worldly strife. Even in its dulcet *ben cantato* and *tranquillo* sections, the first movement's music seems visceral, earthbound, from which the *Molto adagio* elevates the ear to a liturgical plane. The printed score itself—in 4/2 time, melismata floating atop monastic double whole notes—evokes medieval plainchant.

The pithy finale, *Molto allegro (come prima)*, returns us to earth. It positions the *Molto adagio*, not merely as an elegiac salve, but as a means to a resolution, however complicated and imperfect that resolution may be. On its own, the *Adagio* for Strings proffers heavenly rest. But the Opus 11 Quartet only gazes heavenward, seeking elusive respite from the inescapable agita of the mundane. It articulates our struggle. In this, though the *Adagio* has become a universal token of spiritual comfort, the Quartet may be the greater expression of human empathy.

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**Franz Schubert** (b. January 31, 1797, Vienna; d. November 19, 1828, Vienna)

**String Quartet in d minor, D. 810, *Der Tod und das Mädchen* ("Death and the Maiden")**

**Composed:** March 1824; arranged for string orchestra by Gustav Mahler, 1896

**Publication:** July 1831

**First performance:** January 29, 1826, in a private reading at the home of Karl and Franz Hacker, two Viennese amateur musicians

**Approximate duration:** 40 minutes

Schubert's String Quartet in d minor, *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, marks one of the composer's finest accomplishments in the realm of chamber music. Its nickname comes from Schubert's *lied* of the same name. Although the allusion to "Death and the Maiden" appears in the second movement, the opening Allegro immediately sets a forbidding tone, beginning with one of

Schubert's most harrowing gestures. As the exposition unfolds, Schubert demonstrates a Beethovenian fixation with this gesture's compact triplet figure. Even as the second theme takes an optimistic turn, the triplets persist in the viola—without which, this theme might bring respite from the preceding anxiety; instead, the triplets infuse the new melody with a nervous agitation. The portentous triplet figure stubbornly carries on, propelling the obsessively wrought development section, and precipitating the opening theme's powerful return.

The second movement is a set of variations on a theme derived from “Der Tod und das Mädchen.” The theme begins by quoting the song's introductory measures and ends with music from the piano's accompaniment to its final lines, in which Death sings: “Be of good cheer! I am not savage. / You shall sleep softly in my arms.” Schubert's variations reimagine this theme into deeply nuanced statements. In the first variation, the inner strings subtly retain the theme in anxious triplets, beneath sighing gestures in the first violin. The cello plays the theme in broad strokes in the second variation. Melancholy yields to rage in the aggressive third variation, followed by a brief respite in the fourth. The final variation returns to the icy silence of the theme's first appearance.

The *Scherzo* recalls the first movement's unforgiving air. An idyllic trio section offsets the angry *scherzo*, but the diabolical dance has the last word. The final movement is a *tarantella*, a traditional folk dance from the southern Italian town of Taranto, which also gives the tarantula its name. Dubious legend holds that the tarantella's frenetic tempo was designed to shake the venom from a spider bite. Schubert's tarantella easily conjures the image of a panicked, spider-bitten victim dancing desperately to stave off death.