

**Program Notes: *Adagio for Strings***

by Samuel Barber (1910–1981)

Few works in the orchestral repertoire have achieved the emotional immediacy and universal recognition of *Adagio for Strings*. Composed in 1936 as the slow movement of Barber's String Quartet, Op. 11, the piece was later arranged for string orchestra at the encouragement of the legendary conductor Arturo Toscanini, who premiered it in 1938 with the NBC Symphony Orchestra. The performance brought Barber—then just 28 years old—international acclaim.

The *Adagio* unfolds as a single, seamless arc, built from a long-breathed melodic line that rises gradually through a series of intensifying phrases. Barber employs a rich, homophonic texture, allowing the strings to move largely together, creating a unified, vocal-like sonority. The music grows in dynamic and emotional intensity, reaching a searing climax before suddenly breaking into a profound silence. What follows is a quiet, resigned coda, in which the opening material returns, now transformed by the weight of what has come before.

Often associated with mourning and remembrance, the *Adagio for Strings* has been performed at numerous moments of national and international grief, including the funerals of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, as well as memorial services following tragic events. Its solemn dignity and emotional clarity have made it one of the most frequently performed American classical works of the 20th century.

Despite its simplicity of means, the piece achieves a remarkable expressive depth. Barber's careful control of pacing, harmony, and dynamic shading creates an almost architectural inevitability, drawing listeners into a deeply introspective experience. The music's power lies not in complexity, but in its purity—an unbroken line of feeling that speaks directly to the human condition.

In its quiet conclusion, *Adagio for Strings* does not offer resolution so much as acceptance. It leaves the listener suspended in a moment of reflection—an eloquent testament to the enduring expressive potential of the string orchestra.