

Samuel Barber (1910 – 1981)
Overture, *The School for Scandal*

The Delaware Valley can rightly claim Barber as a native son. Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, he began playing piano and cello at the age of six. At 14, he began studies at Philadelphia's famed Curtis Institute of Music.

Samuel Barber always knew what he wanted to be. When he was nine, he wrote his mother: "I have written to tell you my worrying secret. Now don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now, without any nonsense. To begin with I was not meant to be an athlete. I was meant to be a composer, and will be I'm sure. I'll ask you one more thing. Don't ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football."

Early success would seem to have vindicated Barber's determination. In 1933, when Barber was just 23, the Philadelphia Orchestra premiered his *Overture to The School for Scandal*. Three years later, Arturo Toscanini (who was famously reluctant to perform American music), conducted Barber's most famous work, the *Adagio for Strings* (which was featured in the movie "Platoon").

He went on to write two symphonies, concertos for piano and violin, and chamber music. His vocal compositions contain some of his finest music. Knoxville: Summer of 1915, for soprano and orchestra, is perhaps the most notable.

By his death, however, Barber's reputation was somewhat in eclipse. Avant-garde music, especially serialism, was still a prevailing fashion; more accessible styles, such as Barber's neo-Romanticism, were considered hopelessly old-fashioned.

Today, the pendulum has swung back, as a new generation of composers, such as John Adams, Jennifer Higdon, Aaron Kernis, and others, has rediscovered tonality and melody. Nearly a century after confessing his wish to write music, "Sam" Barber has emerged as one of the finest American composers of all.

The Overture to *The School for Scandal* was not composed for a specific production of the classic 18th-century comedy. (Barber's note in the published score says only that it was "suggested by" Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play). Instead, Barber sought to express the wit and satire of the work, whose nature may be conveyed by such character names as Lady Sneerwell, Sir Oliver Surface, Lady Teazle, and Snake.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893)
Violin Concerto

Does Tchaikovsky need an introduction? Along with Beethoven, his is one of the few names instantly recognizable even to people who have never heard a note of classical music (at least that's what Chuck Berry must have been thinking). Tchaikovsky is one of those rare composers whose appeal is so immediate that it cuts across cultural lines, and so enduring that generations of snobbish critics have been unable to diminish it. One of the principal reasons for this is Tchaikovsky's incredible melodic gift. It is almost impossible to find a work of his that doesn't overflow with memorable tunes—especially the work we will hear tonight.

Musical history is full of examples of masterpieces that were scorned and rejected when first performed. Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* was booed at its premiere; many of Mahler's works baffled their audiences; Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* sparked a riot that had to be quelled by the police. But, given the heartfelt appeal and undying popularity of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto, it is hard to imagine it receiving any kind of rough treatment.

Yet, that is precisely what happened at the concerto's premiere in Vienna in 1881, under the baton of Hans Richter, one of the most respected conductors of the era.

While some critics praised the new work, it is the scathing review of celebrated Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick that has become the most famous (largely for Hanslick's monumental misjudgment of a piece that has become one of the best loved violin concertos in the repertoire).

Tchaikovsky, said Hanslick, lacked taste and discrimination. Hanslick thought the concerto long and pretentious.

“For a while it moves soberly, musically, and not without spirit. But soon vulgarity gains the upper hand and asserts itself to the end of the first movement. The violin is no longer played; it is pulled, torn, drubbed.

“The Adagio is again on its best behavior, to pacify and win us with its tender Slavonic sadness. But it soon breaks off to make way for a finale that plunges us into the brutal, deplorable merriment of a Russian holiday carousal. We see savages, vulgar faces, hear coarse oaths and smell fusel-oil. Friedrich Vischer, describing lascivious paintings, once said there were pictures `that stink to the eye.' Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto brings us face to face for the first time with the revolting idea: may there not also be musical compositions which stink to the ear?”

Tchaikovsky was so scarred by Hanslick's review that he was said to have been able to quote it, word for word, for years afterward. But, in the end, as the public and the world's greatest violinists embraced the piece, the last word would be Tchaikovsky's.

Ottorino Respighi (1879 – 1936)
The Pines of Rome

For more than a century, from Rossini to Donizetti, from Verdi to Puccini, opera reigned supreme in Italian music. Respighi changed all that. Reaching back to earlier masters like Vivaldi and Corelli for inspiration, Respighi championed a nationalistic style of instrumental music. Influenced by his teacher, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Respighi's highly colorful and evocative orchestral works were in turn a source of inspiration to generations of film composers.

Born in Bologna, Respighi was the son of a local piano teacher, who instructed him in piano and violin. In 1900, after completing his formal studies, Respighi joined the orchestra of the Russian Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg as a violist. He used this opportunity to study composition with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. After his return to Italy, Respighi devoted his time to serving as first violist in a chamber group. Then, in 1908, he began to concentrate on composition.

In 1913, Respighi moved to Rome after being appointed teacher of composition at the Conservatorio di Santa Cecilia. He remained in Rome for the rest of his life, and used the city as a subject for his most popular orchestral compositions.

Although Respighi was a highly esteemed scholar of early Italian music, and created such delightful orchestrations of 16th-century lute pieces as his three suites of *Ancient Airs and Dances*, and *The Birds*, it is his *Roman Trilogy* of symphonic poems for which was long best known.

The three compositions that compose the trilogy are *Fontane di Roma (The Fountains of Rome)*, *Pini di Roma (The Pines of Rome)*, and *Feste Romane (Roman Festivals)*.

Written in 1924, *The Pines of Rome* was the second part of the Trilogy to be composed. The piece is in four sections, each depicting a different setting in Rome at various times of the day, and, in the last, hearkening back through the centuries to evoke the splendor of Imperial Rome.

In the score, Respighi included written descriptions of each section:

“I. The Pines of Villa Borghese (Allegretto vivace)

Children are at play in the pine groves of Villa Borghese; they dance round in circles. They play at soldiers, marching and fighting, they are wrought up by their own cries like swallows at evening, they come and go in swarms. Suddenly the scene changes and—

“II. The Pine Trees Near a Catacomb (Lento)

—We see the shades of the pine-trees fringing the entrance to a catacomb. From the depth rises the sound of a mournful chant, floating through the air like a solemn hymn, and gradually and mysteriously dispersing.

“III. The Pine Trees of the Janiculum (Lento)

There is a thrill in the air: the pine-trees of the Janiculum stand distinctly outlined in the clear light of the full moon. A nightingale is singing. (Here, Respighi adopted the novel touch of calling for a recording of a nightingale's song.)

“IV. The Pine Trees of the Appian Way (Tempo di marcia)

Misty dawn on the Appian Way: solitary pine-trees guarding the magic landscape; the muffled, ceaseless rhythm of unending footsteps. The poet has a fantastic vision of bygone glories: trumpets sound and, in the brilliance of the newly-risen sun a consular army bursts forth towards the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph to the Capitol.”

George Gershwin (1898 – 1937)
Cuban Overture

There is a story that, when George Gershwin went to Maurice Ravel and asked to study with him, Ravel asked Gershwin how much money he made writing songs and musicals. When Gershwin told him, Ravel supposedly replied, “In that case, perhaps I should be taking lessons from you.”

Like Copland, George Gershwin was born (as Jacob Gershowitz) in Brooklyn of Jewish immigrant parents. Gershwin’s older brother, Ira, was expected to be the musician in the family, and the family’s purchase of a piano was meant for his lessons. But George’s early love of music persuaded his mother otherwise, and he began his own piano lessons at the age of 12. His teacher introduced him to the music of Debussy and Ravel, the early works of Arnold Schoenberg, and the classical piano literature.

A poor student, Gershwin left school at 15 to become a song-plugger on Tin Pan Alley, and published his first song in 1916. It failed to catch on, but three years later, his first Broadway show, ***La, La, Lucille***, ran for more than 100 performances in 1919. That same year, Al Jolson heard ***Swanee***, which Gershwin had written in 1917, and added it to his show. It was a huge hit, selling more than two million records in a year, and sending Gershwin well on his way to wealth and fame. Joined by his brother Ira, as lyricist, Gershwin wrote a string of successful musicals during the 1920s for many of the biggest stars of the day.

In spite of his great success on Broadway, Gershwin was always eager to establish himself as a composer of “serious” music. With such well-loved works as ***Rhapsody in Blue***, ***An American in Paris***, the ***Concerto in F***, and his opera, ***Porgy and Bess***, Gershwin was just beginning to realize his full potential as a composer when his life was cut short by a brain tumor. He died in Hollywood in 1937, at the age of 39.

Five years earlier, in February 1932, Gershwin and some of his friends went to Havana, Cuba, for a vacation that turned out to be anything but restful. Gershwin described the trip as “two hysterical weeks in Cuba, where no sleep was had.”

Gershwin returned home with an idea for a new work that would incorporate the sounds and rhythms he had heard in Cuba, wanting the work to “embody the essence of the Cuban dance.”

He initially called the piece ***Rumba***, but soon renamed it. “‘Cuban Overture,’ ” he wrote, “gives a more just idea of the character and intent of the music.” Gershwin also took pains to explain the then-unfamiliar Cuban percussion he featured in the ***Overture***, drawing pictures of the instruments on the first page of the score, and specifying that the instrumentalists should stand in front of the orchestra next to the conductor, as do any other soloists.