Samuel Barber’s Piano Sonata, Op.26

by Jayoung Hong

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in the School of Music and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.
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Abstract

In his Piano Sonata Op.26, Samuel Barber combines the use of traditional forms, such as Sonata-form and fugue, with twentieth century technique of composition, such as quasi twelve tone writing and motivic development. These tools are used to create four beautiful and characteristic movements that are technically challenging, but also a delight to audiences. Because of this, Barber’s Piano Sonata Op.26 is one of the great works of the twentieth century.
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Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata, Op.26

Samuel Barber (1910-81)'s Piano Sonata is one of the most important composers of twentieth century American piano music. He was born in Pennsylvania in 1910, into a musical family. He began to study music at six and entered the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia at thirteen. When he was nineteen he made his public debut as a composer and had immediate success in the United States.

His Piano Sonata Op.26 was composed for the League of Composers on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1950. The sonata was first presented in public in the same year by Vladimir Horowitz, who hailed it as a masterpiece of American musical literature and an innovative work for the piano. It was written in the middle of Barber's long career, during which much of his music fused his lyrical, elongated melodic style with new compositional devices. The sonata has levels of chromaticism and dissonance not approached in earlier works: however, the forms remain traditional. The work is emotionally more profound and pianistically further advanced than Barber's earlier piano pieces. Barber employs his own version of twelve-tone writing, which is found in the first and third movements. His music is seldom static; even when the harmonies are ambiguous, the contrapuntal texture is alive.

Barber chose to set all the movements in conventional forms; the first is cast in sonata form, fast and energetic. The second movement is a delicate scherzo, set in rondo form. The expressive third movement is the most demonstrative of Barber's encounters with the innovations of the early twentieth century such as 12 tone technique. The fugue, formally similar to those of Bach, serves as the finale. This sonata ranks among the most outstanding piano works produced in the twentieth century.
First Movement; Allegro energico

The overall organization of the first movement of Barber’s Op.26 Sonata may be outlined as follows:

Exposition (mm.1-50)
  First theme (mm.1-19)
  Transition (mm.20-22)
  Second theme group (mm.23-50)

Development (mm.51-109)
  First section (mm.51-74)
  Second section (mm.75-87)
  Third section (mm.88-109)

Recapitulation (mm.110-148)
  First theme (mm.110-126)
  Transition (mm.127-128)
  Second theme group (mm.129-148)

Coda (mm.149-166)

The primary theme is mm.1-19.
Example 1. Sonata, first movement, mm.1-5

The second theme group is mm.23-50.

Example 2. Sonata, first movement, mm.22-28
There are five basic motives and examples of quasi 12 tone aggregates used in this movement.

**A. Motives**

The opening *motive A*, which features a descending half-step with a short-long rhythm, permeates the first movement. The principal theme consists entirely of motive A, which is repeated, inverted, or transposed.

\[
\text{Allegro energico} \quad \text{\textit{piano}}
\]

Example 3. Sonata, first movement, m.1

*Motive B* is an arpeggiated triplet figure which is composed of quartal triads.

\[
\text{a tempo} \quad \textit{B}
\]

Example 4. Sonata, first movement, mm.9-10
Motive C is a chromatically expanding double note figure.

Example 5. Sonata, first movement, mm.16-17

Motive D is a melodic fourth pattern which is possibly an outgrowth from theme II, mm.23-24.

Example 6. Sonata, first movement, mm.28-29
**Motive E** is a repeated figure in sixteenth notes with the last note being syncopated.

![Example 7. Sonata, first movement, mm.35-36](image)

The closing motive E dominates this section and provides a background for all the motives presented thus far. Here are three examples;

![Example 8. Sonata, first movement, m.37, m.43, m.45](image)

**B. Quasi 12 tone**

There are five examples of 12 tone "rows" or aggregates used in this movement. They are not used to compose in a serialist manner, like Arnold Schoenberg, would compose, but instead fit into more pitch-centered patterns.
In mm.3-4, the melody in the upper voice is a descending chromatic scale that covers all twelve notes. In m.9, an arpeggiated quartal triad is used. This is sequenced three times up a minor third, which creates the aggregate.

Example 9. Sonata, first movement, m.9

In m.20, the pitches in the odd number positions ascend chromatically from B natural. The even number pitches descend chromatically from B flat. Together, they cover all 12 tones.

Example 10. Sonata, first movement, mm.20-21
In m.21, an arpeggiated pattern, comprised of four augmented triads, uses all 12 tones.

In m.22, an arpeggiated pattern similar to m.21 continues. The order of pitches within each triad is changed, the order of the augmented triads is kept the same. In the final augmented triad the G# is altered to a G-natural and this aggregate becomes the accompaniment to the second theme. The last half of the second theme, mm.25-27, is the augmented retrograde of the accompanying twelve-note series: the retrograde starts on C, the second note of m.25.

Example 11. Sonata, first movement, mm.22-28
Second movement; Allegro vivace e leggero

In contrast to the first movement’s seriousness, the second movement is in a light scherzo-like texture. The overall form is a five-part rondo, ABACA, with some modification. Three transitions, each approximately ten to fifteen measures in length, bridge a number of the sections.

Section A (mm.1-26) pitch center=G
Transition group (mm.27-30, mm.31-47)
Section B (mm.47-70) begin in C major (ends up using the complete aggregate)
Bridge passage (mm.71-80)
Section A (mm.81-102) pitch center=G
Section C (mm.103-113) pitch center=Eb
Transition (mm.114-125)
Variation of “A” (mm.126-139)
Section A (mm.140-155) pitch center=G
Codetta (mm.156-165)

There are three motives in the second movement and they are rhythmically very similar.

A. Motives

1. Motive 1 and 2

Motive 1 is repeated three times and achieves its final form on the third repetition.
Interestingly, the falling half step motive of the first movement is embedded within both motives 1 and 2.

2. Motive 3

The second phrase employs Motive 3, which is built on an arpeggiation of a major triad. Motive 3 is then repeated in a different key.

The “B” Section of the Rondo begins at m.47. The main material used here is motive 3.
and its inversion (m.51). Motive 3 is accompanied by a waltz rhythm in the left hand.

Example 14. Sonata, second movement, mm.50-54

Third movement; Adagio mesto

The third movement uses a traditional ternary form

Introduction (mm.1-2)
Section A (mm.3-10)
Transition (mm.11-14)
Section B (mm.15-27)
Section A (mm.28-36)
Codetta (mm.37-39)

The movement, in addition to having a ternary form, is a dirge with an underlying passacaglia construction throughout.¹

Use of quasi-12 tone writing

This movement is one of the most tragic of Barber's slow movements. It is based on

two twelve-tone aggregates. The first aggregate is presented in the first two measures and then in single notes in the following two measures in the bass. In mm.1-2 the aggregate is arranged in two hexachords that have the same prime form (014589). These hexachords are both transpositionally and inversionally symmetrical. In mm.3-4, the same hexachords are presented as an augmented triad in the bass line. The second aggregate occurs in the bass in mm.5-6 and is constructed of three diminished seventh chords. The two aggregates are used as accompaniment to a beautiful melodic line.

Example 15. Sonata, third movement, mm.1-5

Section B, mm.15-27, is much like a development. It states no new thematic material but rather recasts the melodic material of section A in a more embellished manner. The basic meter of the section is 6/8, compared to the 3/4 of section A. The texture of section B is thicker due to the addition of voices (primarily octave doublings).
The return of section A, m.28, is more contrapuntal and complex than the original version. M.28 is characterized by an increase in the importance of the middle voice. The relationship between the upper two voices is imitative, with the upper voice being the leader.
The final three measures (mm.37-39) of the movement, comprising the codetta, are similar to each other melodically and rhythmically. In the right hand, the third and fourth notes are interchanged with the fifth and sixth. The left hand line has a G# to G emphasis that reminds us of the descending half step that is the most important motivic interval of the entire sonata.

Example 18. Sonata, third movement, mm.36-39

Fourth movement: Allegro con spirito

The general character of the fourth movement of the sonata is a fugue that uses jazz-inspired harmonies and rhythms. The structural form of the fugue is:
First section (mm.1-36)
Exposition (mm.1-12)
Episode 1 (mm.13-16)
Restatement 1 (mm.17-26)
Episode 2 (mm.27-36)

Second section (mm.37-89)
Restatement 2 (mm.37-54)
Episode 3 (mm.55-63)
Restatement 3 (mm.64-80)
Episode 4 (mm.81-89)

Third section (mm.90-146)
Restatement 4 (mm.90-94)
Episode 5 (mm.95-98)
Restatement 5 (mm.99-106)
Coda (mm.107-146)

The basic tonality of the fugue is E-flat minor, as in the first movement. The subject of the fugue is quite long and is divided into two parts, motive a and motive b.
Fugue Subjects a, b

Example 19. Sonata, fourth movement, mm.1-4

The countersubject is introduced in m.4 in the treble. It is repeated down a step and then expanded to larger intervals in m.5. In m.10 the countersubject appears both above and below the subject.

Countersubject C
Development of Primary Melodic Material

In the exposition, mm. 1-12, the fugue subject is presented four times.

Episode 1 is an imitation of the countersubject. M.13 contains stretto imitation in two voices; m.14 is stretto imitation with inversion; mm.15-16 adds a third voice.

Restatement 1, mm.17-26, uses motives a, b and c in various contrapuntal techniques.

In Episode 2, mm.27-28, the texture is in four voices, with the bass in augmentation of the tenor.
Example 21. Sonata, fourth movement, mm.25-30

In restatement 2, mm.37-54, almost the entire section occurs over various pedal tones. The harmony over the pedal tones gradually becomes thicker and more dynamic. Mm. 40-54 also display motives a and c in augmentation, imitation and inversion.
Example 22. Sonata, fourth movement, mm. 39-46

Mm. 55-63, constituting episode 3, are constructed solely out of motive, c. The lower voice is slower and more lyrical in nature.
A sudden tonal shift to C major at m.64 occurs at the beginning of restatement 3. From here through m.81, Barber uses all of the motives in various guises of repetition, imitation, and augmentation.

Example 23. Sonata, fourth movement, mm.70-75

Episode 4, mm.81-89, contains greater amounts of intervallic doublings of lines than episode 2. Mm.88-89 stands out with large double forte tone clusters consisting of up to six
notes per chord.

Example 24. Sonata, fourth movement, mm.88-91

Restatement 4, constituting mm.90-94, is the briefest section and develops motives a and b.

Episode 5, comprising mm.95-98, is constructed using motive c, and is notable for meter changes. Motive c is treated in a chromatic descending sequence in mm.95-97. In m.98, there
is a very interesting metrically free cadenza, which is a sequenced and figuration descending by fourths and fifth.

Example 25. Sonata, fourth movement, mm. 98-101

Restatement 5, m.99-106, features a striking augmentation of motive a. Rhythmically, this motive presents constant eighth notes. The texture is homophonic and the melody is in the top voice.

The coda, mm.107-146, initiates a gradual build-up in rhythmic drive. The fourth movement culminates with the last presentation of the augmented motive a.
Example 26. Sonata, fourth movement, mm.131-146
Barber combines the use of traditional forms, such as Sonata-form and fugue with twentieth century techniques of composition, such as quasi twelve tone writing and motivic development. The result of this is four beautiful and characteristic movements that are technically challenging, but also a delight to audiences. For these reasons, Barber’s piano sonata Op.26 is one of the great piano works of the twentieth century.
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