

# Piano Concerto Op38

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

*Allegro appassionato*  
*Canzone (Moderato)*  
*Allegro molto*

## Samuel Barber

Best known for his achingly poignant *Adagio for Strings* (1936), arranged from the slow movement of his only string quartet and heard in countless movie soundtracks, Samuel Barber was held in great affection and respect as one of America's most accomplished and versatile composers.

Born in Pennsylvania, he showed musical talent from a remarkably early age, writing his first composition at seven and his first opera at ten, before being accepted into the newly established Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia at the age of fourteen, where he was to meet his life partner, fellow composer Gian Carlo Menotti, in 1928.

His only piano concerto marks one of the highpoints of his career, and was one of a trio of works commissioned from Barber to celebrate the opening of New York's Lincoln Center in 1962 – the others being the concert scene *Andromache's Farewell* and the opera *Antony and Cleopatra*, written for the Metropolitan Opera's opening season.

## Composition

Barber began work on the Piano Concerto in March 1960 and completed the first two movements before the end of that year, but left the final movement incomplete until just two weeks before its premiere in September 1962, taking time to recover from the death of his sister in 1961. Nevertheless, the work was a huge critical and popular success, and won Barber his second Pulitzer Prize for music in 1963.

The Piano Concerto's style falls somewhere between lush Romanticism and energetic modernism, but its wild rhythms and biting dissonances are about as far from Barber's moving *Adagio* as it's possible to be. Nevertheless, it's music of immense emotional appeal, rugged and memorable.

## The opening movement

The first movement opens with an imperious solo-piano declamation before the orchestra moves in with a sweeping, urgent section full of surging melodies. An oboe introduces a plaintive second theme, which is then taken up by the strings, and after two long, steady build-

ups, where the music seems to shimmer with barely suppressed energy, the soloist's thunderous *cadenza* leads into a high-energy conclusion.

## Canzone

The wistful, introverted second-movement *Canzone* began life as an Elegy for flute and piano (1959), and its simple melody unfolds gracefully in conversations between piano, strings and woodwind.

## Finale

The final movement is fast and furious. The piano's aggressive main theme is twice interrupted by more subdued material – first by a clarinet with brittle xylophone accompaniment, and later by a more lyrical woodwind melody. Pounding piano chords herald the work's glittering, breathless ending.

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# Piano Concerto

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

*Andante sostenuto*  
*Molto moderato (molto rubato) – Allegro assai*

## The influence of jazz

Aaron Copland devoted much of his remarkably long life to forging an authentically American musical style. In his most famous pieces, such as the well-loved *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944), he successfully blended US folk influences with a sweeping expansiveness and a brassy directness to evoke the energy and ambition of his homeland. But one of his earliest inspirations was jazz. Growing up in Brooklyn, the young Copland immersed himself in New York's contemporary music scene and was never far from its vibrant jazz culture. Travelling to France to study with the great teacher Nadia Boulanger from 1921 to 1924, Copland came to see jazz as the first truly American musical movement – and one that he could combine with the clarity and elegance of European modernism to create a new and distinctively American music.

Copland wrote his only piano concerto in 1926, to a commission from conductor Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

It's his most clearly jazz-influenced piece, but doesn't always sound like jazz – it's as though Copland has refracted the style through his 1920s modernism, with often sophisticated results.

The piece came just two years after Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, and only a year after Gershwin's Piano Concerto. Some critics have claimed the concerto was Copland's response to these two works, but the composer remained tight-lipped, later admitting in a 1937 talk that he'd taken a far more intellectual approach to jazz than his colleague: "Gershwin is serious up to a point. My idea was to intensify it. Not what you get in the dance hall, but to use it cubistically – to make it more exciting than ordinary jazz."

## The music

The piece is in two movements, which run without a pause, and which reflect what Copland considered to be the two basic moods of jazz – "the slow blues and the snappy number". His opening "slow blues" movement begins with an arresting call to attention in the brass, but the piano's

first entry is surprisingly introspective. After a long orchestral build-up based on a distinctive rocking motif, the music suddenly cuts to almost nothingness in preparation for the second movement.

Copland's "snappy number" opens with a jittery, hesitant piano solo with hints of ragtime, which is taken up by the orchestra in a complex interplay of rhythms. Later the brass and woodwind are in the spotlight for a series of jazzy tunes, and after a thrilling *cadenza* for the pianist, the concerto builds to a noisy, exciting conclusion.

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## What is a *cadenza*?

Concertos often include sections of music where the soloist has a chance to "show off". This is called a *cadenza* and it lets us hear the impressive skill of the soloist.