Reno Chamber Orchestra
Salute to Youth
May 18, 2025

Samuel Barber

Born: March 9, 1910, West Chester, Pennsylvania
Died: January 23, 1981, New York, New York

Samuel Barber remained separate from the modernist trends of the twentieth century, writing music with an emotional directness and melodic generosity largely out of fashion at the time. Part of a musical family – his mother was a pianist, his aunt a contralto at the Metropolitan Opera, and his uncle a composer – Barber was attracted to music at a very early age. At 14 he became part of the very first class at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied piano, composition, and voice. There he met composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who became his life partner and musical collaborator. The slow movement of Barber's String Quartet, now known as the *Adagio for Strings*, has become his most famous piece (more below). Barber won two Pulitzer Prizes: the first in 1958 for the opera *Vanessa*, and the second in 1963 for his Piano Concerto. His music was embraced by some of the greatest musicians of his time, commissioned and first performed by the likes of Vladimir Horowitz, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and Leontyne Price.

Adagio for Strings

Composed: 1936
Duration: 9 minutes
Instrumentation: strings

The subject of a book titled *The Saddest Music Ever Written* and the winner by a wide margin of a BBC poll choosing the saddest piece of music ever (Henry Purcell's *Dido's Lament* came in second, and the Adagietto from Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5 third), the slow movement of Barber's String Quartet, Op. 11 is often now performed on its own as the *Adagio for Strings*. It became the composer's signature piece, especially when Arturo Toscanini featured it in a famous NBC Symphony concert in 1938, and it soon came to be associated with important periods of mourning. Broadcast on the radio when Franklin Delano Roosevelt died and after the funeral of John F. Kennedy, the Adagio won even more attention through its use in films like *The Elephant Man* and *Platoon*.

Opening with a soft B-flat from the first violin, the lower strings soon come in as the work's main melody slowly ascends in steps. The melody unwinds for a time, eventually building to an impassioned climax with four extended chords, followed by a sudden and lengthy silence. The opening theme then returns, and the work ultimately fades away on an unresolved chord.

Felix Mendelssohn

Born: February 3, 1809, Hamburg, Germany
Died: November 4, 1847, Leipzig, Germany

Felix Mendelssohn was one of the most popular composers of his time. He was also one of the few musical prodigies whose youthful ability could rival Mozart’s. The grandson of philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, young Felix grew up in a home that welcomed as guests many of the most learned people of his day. He took piano, violin, and singing lessons as a youth. By the age of eight he was studying composition, and was producing remarkably assured works by his teens, including the Octet at age 16 and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at 17. Mendelssohn was a key figure in resurrecting the reputation of Johann Sebastian Bach, leading the *St. Matthew Passion* (the first performance the work had enjoyed since Bach’s death in 1750) in a now-famous 1829 concert. He subsequently held conducting posts in Düsseldorf and Berlin. But much of his later life was spent in Leipzig, where he directed the Gewandhaus Orchestra and founded the esteemed Leipzig Conservatory.

Violin Concerto in D minor (movements 1 and 2)

Composed: 1822
Duration: 16 minutes
Instrumentation: solo violin, strings

One of the most famous violin concertos in the repertoire is the Concerto in E minor that Felix Mendelssohn composed for his friend Ferdinand David in the late 1830s and early 1840s. But this was not the first violin concerto that Mendelssohn composed. Mendelssohn was, of course, one of the great prodigies of all time. He was a brilliant piano virtuoso, and was writing fine pieces of music from a young age. Even by age eleven, he had composed a number of sonatas and songs.

Between ages twelve and fourteen, his composing took a leap forward, as he composed twelve symphonies for strings and a number of other works, one of which was a Concerto in D minor for violin and strings. The thirteen-year-old Mendelssohn had composed this concerto for his first violin and viola teacher, Eduard Rietz. But the concerto apparently went unplayed and was forgotten. The score was given to Ferdinand David, in fact, after Mendelssohn's death. Over the next century, the score went through a number of hands. In 1951, the concerto was brought to the attention of famed violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin. With the approval of the Mendelssohn family, Menuhin edited the work, had it published, and was the soloist in what was apparently its premiere performance on February 4, 1952 at Carnegie Hall. Calling it “full of invention,” Menuhin went on to perform the work often, and recorded it three times.

While the Concerto in D minor hasn't really become part of the standard repertoire, it is still a noteworthy piece, one that shows just how advanced Mendelssohn's compositional abilities were, even at thirteen. The opening Allegro features two main melodies, both heard before the solo violin makes its entry. That solo part is full of virtuoso display, extended arpeggios, and fiery exchanges with the string orchestra. The waltz-like second movement Andante in 3/8 time is lovely, lyrical and just a bit sentimental, with more passionate moments mixed in.

Frédéric Chopin

Born: March 1, 1810, Zelazowa Wola, Poland

Died: October 17, 1849, Paris, France

According to Vladimir Horowitz, Frédéric Chopin was "the only truly great composer for the piano." Chopin mostly worked in shorter forms, such as the ballade (which he invented), nocturne, prelude, waltz, and Polish dances like the mazurka and polonaise. He was a prodigy, performing private salon concerts and composing his first works at age seven. Later he studied at the Warsaw Lyceum and University of Warsaw. After completing his studies he moved to Vienna and later settled in Paris, pursuing his career through recitals throughout Europe – the twenty-one year old Chopin was the subject of Robert Schumann's famous remark "Hats off, gentlemen! A genius!" Composition and teaching took precedence over performing as the years passed. In fact, despite his towering reputation as a performer, he only played some forty to fifty public concerts in his entire life, most in private homes to small audiences. His turbulent, much-publicized affair with the French novelist George Sand extended over a decade. Chopin contracted tuberculosis in the late 1830s, and it was the likely cause of his death at age thirty-nine.

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor, Op. 11 (movement 1)

Composed 1829-30
Duration: 20 minutes
Instrumentation: solo piano, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, bass trombone, timpani, strings

Both of Chopin's piano concertos date from his teens. The Piano Concerto No. 1 is actually the later of the works, begun late in 1829. Shortly after completing it, in early 1831, Chopin left Poland on a European concert tour, thinking he would soon return. But within days of his arrival at his first tour stop, Vienna, a political revolt began in Poland. Chopin soon settled in Paris, and never returned to his homeland. It's likely that Chopin sometimes performed his concertos at private salon concerts accompanied by a chamber ensemble, but no such scores in his hand exist. Based on investigations by several scholars and pianists, chamber arrangements of the concertos have been derived from Chopin's original scores.

The orchestral introduction of the opening movement, in which the three main themes are first heard, is unusually long, making the entrance of the piano that much more dramatic. Once it appears, the piano takes its turn with the three melodies, particularly focusing on the second in the central development. Despite the term "maestoso" in the movement's tempo marking, much of the music is actually quite lyrical in nature, with some extravagant ornamentation and display from the soloist.

Tanner Porter

Tanner Porter is a composer-performer and songwriter. In her "original art songs that are by turns seductive and confessional" (*The New Yorker*), Tanner explores her passion for storytelling, often framing her work within the imagery of the California coast she grew up on. She has been commissioned to write and perform song cycles by Dumbarton Oaks and the Louisville Orchestra. As a performer, Tanner was in the original Broadway cast of *Illinoise*, with music by Sufjan Stevens. She has recorded two albums, *One Was Gleaming* and *The Summer Sinks*. Tanner's orchestral music has

been commissioned by the San Francisco Ballet, Louisville Orchestra, Albany Symphony Orchestra, Nu Deco Ensemble, and the New York Youth Symphony. She was composer-in-residence with the Louisville Orchestra's 2023-2024 Creators Corps, a 2022 Early Career Musician in Residence at Dumbarton Oaks, and has been a fellow of the Aspen Music Festival, Djerassi Resident Artists Program, Gabriela Lena Frank Creative Academy of Music, and Norfolk Chamber Music Festival. She holds degrees in composition from the University of Michigan (BM) and the Yale School of Music (MM). She is a member of ANTiCX collective.

Sage-Grouse

Composed: 2025
Duration: 10 minutes
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, piano, strings

Sage-Grouse was commissioned by the Reno Chamber Orchestra as the debut of its new Sound Investment commissioning program. The piece is in two movements of roughly equal duration, titled “Warning” and “Brush and Dance.”

Tanner Porter provides the following description of the work in the score.

“*Sage-Grouse* was commissioned by the Reno Chamber Orchestra. In researching the landscape surrounding Reno, NV, I was astounded to learn about the Sage-Grouse, whose lekking choreography and accompanying sounds are spectacular and strange. Working on this piece at the time of the L.A. fires, I was considering the rate at which a cherished ecosystem can disappear – gradual, or overnight. The two movements explore the fear of losing something loved, and the joy of loving it.

“At present, the Greater Sage-Grouse is considered a Sensitive Species with a protected habitat and a declining population. They are an 'umbrella species,' meaning that their presence in the Sagebrush Sea affects the animals and plants around them, and so Sage-Grouse conservation efforts have implications for the broader ecosystem. The music loosely emulates a number of sounds the Greater Sage-Grouse makes (the wing swish heard before a quick inhalation that fills the air sacks in the male’s chests; the popping, rubber-band-like inhalation of air; the low huffing, snorting sounds that come in a quick succession of clicks and grunts). The piece opens with a repetitive call made by the juvenile Greater sage-grouse. The music also references the sounds of the Scrub Jay, Northern Flicker and Pinyon Jay heard in Reno. This piece was informed largely by the catalogue of bird calls made free and public by the Cornell Lab’s Macaulay Library, by information provided by the American Conservancy, and by time spent on site in Reno.

“Thank you to Kelly Kuo and Amy Heald of the Reno Chamber Orchestra for their kindness and time before and during the workshopping process. A very special thank you to the Sound Investment Investors, whose contributions made this piece possible, and whose thoughtful conversation during the writing process helped shape the music:”

Louise Farrenc

Born: May 31, 1804, Paris, France
Died: September 15, 1875, Paris, France

Born Jeanne-Louise Dumont, Louise Farrenc showed considerable skills as a pianist from a young age. She subsequently had several prestigious teachers, including two of the best pianists of that time, Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Ignaz Moscheles. She also showed promise as a composer, and possibly studied with Anton Reicha at the Paris Conservatoire starting when she was fifteen. In 1821 she married a flutist she met at the Conservatoire, Aristide Farrenc, and took his last name. Farrenc toured as a pianist for years, her reputation as a virtuoso becoming such that, in 1842, she was appointed Professor of Piano at the Paris Conservatoire – the only such appointment at that institution given to a woman in the nineteenth century. She held the position for thirty years. As a composer, she initially focused on music for the piano, then moved to writing chamber and orchestra music in the late 1830s and 1840s. After her death, she was remembered for her piano playing but largely forgotten as a composer, until a revival of interest in her music in the last couple of decades.

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 35

Composed: 1845
Duration: 33 minutes
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings

In 1841, Farrenc composed the first of her three symphonies, with the second following four years later. That Symphony No. 2 was a particular success when it was premiered at the Paris Conservatoire in May of 1846, and at a subsequent performance in Belgium the following year. However, despite the fact that her concerts as a pianist and as a composer were consistently well-received, she had trouble convincing orchestras to perform her symphonies. She wrote but one further symphony, and gave up writing for orchestra entirely by the late 1840s.

While her First Symphony adhered to the form and sound of Classical era composers like Mozart and Beethoven, by the time of the Symphony No. 2, the sound world of later Romantic era composers like Carl Maria von Weber and Felix Mendelssohn was starting to enter the mix. But the construction and focus of the Symphony No. 2 are very much Farrenc's own. Despite its D major key signature, one might mistake the work for a minor key symphony, so turbulent and dramatic is much of the music.

A powerful call-to-attention leads off the slow introduction to the first movement. Calmer, more pastoral music alternates with more portentous sounds until the tempo speeds to Allegro. Even as the music sparkles, it never quite seems to leave behind the minor key. The second main theme, introduced by the woodwinds, flows in an easier fashion, but even this idea builds dramatically. After a stormy development section, with tumultuous string passages and brass eruptions, the main melodies repeat, with a little further development, leading to another increase of tempo and a decisive coda.

The second movement is quite a contrast to the first – peaceful and flowing, moving at an easy Andante pace, with but a few clouds on the horizon. Delicate woodwind contributions are a highlight, particularly an extended section toward the end of the movement. There are, however, a few more insistent passages that may call Beethoven to mind.

The scherzo third movement once again emphasizes dramatic contrasts. The central section, with its drones and sprightly woodwinds, moves briefly into more dance-like territory – some have heard the influence of Beethoven's “Pastoral” Symphony No. 6 here. That movement moves directly into the short but grand opening to the Allegro finale, more triumphant in tone after the stresses of the previous movements. Some contrapuntal writing for the strings might hint at the finale of Mozart's “Jupiter” Symphony, and Beethoven's “Eroica” Symphony doesn't seem far away, either. Forward momentum is maintained, aside from a few more relaxed interludes focusing on the winds, through to the work's powerful conclusion.

Program notes by Chris Morrison