

TO BE AIRBORNE: THE WARTIME SYMPHONIES OF BARBER AND BLITZSTEIN

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Abstract

This article examines the context, composition, and reception of two works commissioned by the United States Army Air Forces during World War II: Samuel Barber's Second Symphony and Marc Blitzstein's Airborne Symphony. The first part of the article situates the two works within their time, surveying the uses of art music by the military during the war and explaining the high cultural status of the symphony as a genre during the 1940s. The second part demonstrates that both symphonies musically depict concepts then associated with flight, such as modernity, solitude, and adventure—sometimes in strikingly similar ways. Finally, the article considers the two works' reception histories, which have been negatively colored by their provenance in the war. The author suggests that, whatever the symphonies' flaws, they are due for reassessment: they evoke an era in which art music was valued across many layers of society, both for its prestige and its perceived communicative power—and that era deserves to be remembered.

Keywords

Samuel Barber – Marc Blitzstein – United States Army Air Forces – World War II – Flight – Symphony – 1940s American Culture

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Composers Samuel Barber and Marc Blitzstein are rarely associated with one another, despite being American musicians of the same generation. Barber's musical style was Romantic; Blitzstein's was eclectic. Barber's politics were opaque; Blitzstein's were strictly leftist. Barber's works are staples of the modern repertoire; Blitzstein's have nearly disappeared from the Western canon. Yet there are some surprising similarities between the two composers' lives. Both grew up near Philadelphia, with Barber in the suburb of West Chester and Blitzstein in Philadelphia proper. Both were among the earliest students of the Curtis Institute of Music, where they studied with Italian-American composer Rosario Scalero. Both were hailed for their idiomatic vocal writing. Both were gay men. And both served in, and were commissioned to write symphonies by, the United States Army Air Forces during World War II.¹ The resulting works—Barber's Second Symphony, for orchestra, and Blitzstein's *Airborne* Symphony, for speaker, male chorus, and orchestra—evoke ideas then associated with flight, including modernity, solitude, and adventure. But whereas Barber incorporated more dissonance and rhythmic irregularity into his music with this commission, Blitzstein continued honing the popular, almost cinematic style in which he was working at the time. Neither symphony, however, has enjoyed many performances since, perhaps in part due to the increased skepticism of the US military by artists that came with the Vietnam

1 Unlike today, the Air Force was then a part of the army, not an independent branch of the military.

War. In the following article, I suggest that these works are due for reassessment. Certainly, both have passages of compelling music, but their true worth lies in that they are both expressions of their time. The history of their genesis and composition evokes an era in which art music was valued across many layers of society, both for its prestige and its perceived communicative power—an era that deserves to be remembered.

Today, the thought of the Air Force commissioning a piece of concert music is almost unimaginable. Classical music has lost much of its social status, and modern American society is not conducive to national unity in wartime. Yet in the United States during the Second World War, music, and the performing arts generally, were associated with culture, freedom, and all that was worth fighting for. Writing for *The New York Times* in 1941, theater critic Brooks Atkinson captured the wartime ethos:

The free arts of stage and screen, music, dancing, literature and painting are the essence of the faith we are preparing to defend. No one should take them lightly as agreeable diversions. They are It: they spread enlightenment, and they help create a flexible, rich and growing society.²

Theater was valued by the armed forces for its popularity and marketability. Over the course of the war, the army produced on Broadway *The Army Play by Play*, a collection of five one-act plays written by American soldiers. Additionally, the United Services Organization (USO), an army support agency, provided scripts for soldiers themselves to perform, and the Air Force hired playwright Moss Hart to write the laudatory *Winged Victory: The Army Air Forces Play*. Ticket sales for this production supported the Army Emergency Relief Fund.³ Meanwhile, within the sphere of music, classical music in particular was imbued with social worth. In her exhaustive study of music in America during World War II, musicologist Annegret Fauser describes how, “in keeping with the ideologies of cultural hierarchy still prevalent in the 1940s, classical music was ... cast as a mighty force for moral and emotional uplift that by its intrinsic power could affect listeners across all social and educational strata.”⁴ Furthermore, she explains, “Newly composed music was celebrated as an active contribution to the war effort, if just to resist defeatism: only a strong culture could continue to produce art that mattered.”⁵ Writing in the *Christian Science Monitor* about Barber’s Second Symphony, Laura Haddock illustrates Fauser’s argument well:

Assignment by the Army Air Forces of Corporal Barber to write this symphony implies recognition that first-class American music is good American propaganda in the best sense of the word. Not only does such music have a good effect upon

2 Brooks Atkinson, “Defense of the Arts,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1941. Atkinson, it seems, was already confident that America would soon enter the war.

3 Albert Wertheim, “The Dramatic Art of Uncle Sam: The Government, Drama, and World War II,” *American Drama* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 86–92.

4 Annegret Fauser, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40.

5 *Ibid.*, 55.

morale in our own ranks, but it is expected to introduce fittingly the American spirit and the American musical genius to people of other lands.⁶

This social climate resulted in a great deal of music making. The military maintained several performing organizations, including the US Marine Band, the Army Air Force Band, the US Navy Band Symphony Orchestra, and the US Navy Band String Quartet, all of which gave numerous concerts, primarily of nineteenth-century repertoire, for both troops and civilians.⁷ The USO, meanwhile, helped organize concerts for troops stationed in the United States and abroad, some of which featured the classical stars of the day. Isaac Stern performed in the Pacific, Yehudi Menuhin played in London, and Lily Pons sang in Burma, accompanied at the piano by her husband Andre Kostelanetz.⁸ The Army's own Special Services Department also provided musical entertainment for troops. Its roles were numerous. Composer Robert Ward, who served as an army band director, doubted anyone could "give a full picture of the musical activity sponsored by the Special Services,"⁹ but its general focus was on troops stationed abroad, especially those in places too dangerous to host civilian performers. Popular music comprised much of the material issued by the Special Services, (the widely distributed *Army Hit Kit*, for example, featured sheet music and lyrics for popular songs), but classical music was gradually incorporated into the repertoire featured on V-Discs, 78-rpm recordings sent to army bases around the world.¹⁰

As these designated groups were entertaining American troops, the Office of War Information (OWI), courted listeners abroad. The OWI did not consider music a primary concern, but it nonetheless supported the recording and broadcasting of radio programs across the world. The agency worked with numerous American composers over the course of the war, including Barber and Blitzstein, as well as Henry Cowell, Elliott Carter, and Colin McPhee, Aaron Copland, and Kurt Weill. With the help of composers such as Cowell and McPhee, who were educated in non-Western music, the agency programmed works of Chinese folk song and Javanese gamelan music to appeal to local tastes. Yet, because it demonstrated that the United States had not only military but also cultural prowess, American classical music was important to the agency as well, and it funded several major new works, including Barber's *Capricorn Concerto*.¹¹

6 Laura Haddock, "Boston Hears Symphony Dedicated to Air Forces," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 3, 1944.

7 Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 26–32.

8 *Ibid.*, 37–50.

9 Robert Ward, "Letter from the Army," *Modern Music* 20, no. 3 (March-April 1943): 172.

10 Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 113–122. According to Fauser, the V-Disc program illustrates the debate within the Army between encouraging music making—best achieved with popular song—and encouraging cultural education—best achieved with classical music.

11 *Sounds of War*, 76–93.

As an emblem of nationhood and an indicator of cultural maturity, the genre of the symphony was well suited to fulfilling the functions of entertainment, moral instruction, and propaganda accorded to classical music during the Second World War. The symphony's status in the United States dates to the late nineteenth century, when many Americans felt their nation had achieved societal independence while lacking its own artistic identity. American composers were eager to remedy this deficit by producing music that would rival Western European culture.¹² Because of the symphony's rich history as a genre full of communicative power, it was the ideal vehicle for American composers to seek cultural parity with the Old World. By the 1880s, conductors including Anton Seidl, Walter Damrosch, Franck Van der Stucken, and Henry Krehbiel promoted concerts featuring American symphonists such as John Knowles Paine, George Chadwick, and Amy Beach. In 1892, New York philanthropist Jeannette Thurber recruited Antonin Dvořák to head her newly established National Conservatory and help America discover its musical voice. Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, with its echoes of African-American and Native American melodies, became a model for a generation of American composers seeking a distinctive, national sound.¹³ A period of greater experimentation in symphonic form, with less emphasis on nationalism, followed in the 1920s, but by the 1930s, American composers had renewed their ties with nineteenth-century models and the ideal of a national sound. The exigencies of the Great Depression inspired many composers to write with a broad public in mind: Copland famously sought to find a style "both simple and direct"; Virgil Thomson employed cowboy folk tunes and Protestant hymns in his film scores; and Roy Harris promoted his ties to a semi-mythical West.¹⁴ Their aesthetics transferred well onto the genre of the symphony. Of symphonic composers from this time, Nicholas Tawa explains,

[They] sought to make the term 'symphony' indicate a recognizable form that respected its own conventions and norms and proved welcoming to audiences. As for content, they most often chose to adhere to an elevated subject—one that symbolized their ideals and those of a free people.¹⁵

With its traditional roots and public character, then, the symphony was well placed to become, in Fauser's words, "the crowning genre of musical Americana during World War II."¹⁶ As Blitzstein wrote to composer David Diamond, "Of course symphonies

¹² Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Sound Diplomacy: Music and Emotions in Transatlantic Relations, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 153–154.

¹³ Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007). See 97–110 for discussion of Paine, Chadwick, Beach, and others, and 222–231 for discussion of Dvořák in America. For further discussion of Thurber's National Conservatory, see Emanuel Rubin, "Jeannette Myers Thurber and the National Conservatory of Music," *American Music* 8, no. 3 (Autumn 1990): 294–325.

¹⁴ Nicholas Tawa, *The Great American Symphony: Music, the Depression, and War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 18–20. Horowitz, *Classical Music*, 433–445 (Copland quoted on p. 435).

¹⁵ Tawa, *Great American Symphony*, 20. See 17–30 for an overview of the public role of the symphony during the early to mid-twentieth century.

¹⁶ Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 255.

must be written now.”¹⁷ Yet during the war, no American composer and no American symphony could escape comparison with Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich and his “Leningrad” Symphony. The circumstances of its composition—begun in besieged Leningrad and completed after evacuating the city—were dramatic; its program—the depiction of “the simple, peaceful life” interrupted by war—was immediately accessible; and its American broadcast premiere—by Toscanini and the NBC Orchestra on July 19, 1942—was a sensation, ultimately prompting *Time* magazine to feature the composer on its cover.¹⁸ The Seventh quickly became the exemplary war symphony, both for orchestras and for some composers. Every major American orchestra performed the work between July 1942 and January 1943, with the NBC Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic both performing it twice.¹⁹

Harris responded to the work by dedicating his Fifth Symphony to the people of the Soviet Union (“Comparison with the Shostakovich *Seventh* is inevitable,” wrote composer and critic Charles Mills), and Copland praised Shostakovich for “[making] the music of a living composer come fully alive for a world audience.”²⁰ Even criticism of the Seventh reveals the special status it held during the war. Virgil Thomson, lamented that Shostakovich’s then recent symphonies, including the Seventh, were promoted to the public as “models of patriotic expression.”²¹ Barber and Blitzstein, for their part, were both aware of Shostakovich’s symphony as they were writing their own. Barber told *Newsweek* magazine that he was “very happy that America is beginning to use composers in the same way Russia is using Shostakovich,” and for musicologist Christopher Gibbs, “the model of the Seventh is clear” in Barber’s Second Symphony.²²

17 Quoted in Eric Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 232.

18 Laurel E. Fay, *Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 123–133.

19 Christopher H. Gibbs, “‘The Phenomenon of the Seventh’: A Documentary Essay on Shostakovich’s ‘War’ Symphony,” in *Shostakovich and his World*, ed. Laurel E. Fay (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 64, 97.

20 Charles Mills, “Over the Air,” *Modern Music* 20, no. 3 (March–April 1943): 209 (italics original); Aaron Copland, “From the ‘20s to the ‘40s and Beyond,” *Modern Music* 20, no. 2 (January–February 1943): 82.

21 Virgil Thomson, “Masterpieces,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 25, 1944.

22 Barber quoted in Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 237; Gibbs, “Phenomenon,” 101–102. I find Gibbs’s assessment of Shostakovich’s influence on Barber too strong. Barber may have been influenced by the *idea* of the Seventh, but I hear few overt similarities between his concise, angular symphony and Shostakovich’s sprawling, melodic one. Nevertheless, Barber and Shostakovich seem to have admired each other’s music. In the

Meanwhile, Blitzstein remained “particularly mindful” of the Seventh, according to musicologist Howard Pollack. After hearing the symphony in London in November 1942, Blitzstein suggested that it put music “on the map as a positive weapon in winning the war.”²³ Shostakovich’s symphony was not a permanent fixture in the American concert hall during the war—performances declined as rapidly in 1943 as they had increased in 1942— but its topicality and popular success left a lasting impression on many American composers.²⁴

In December 1942, Blitzstein proposed to his commanding officer, Colonel Beirne Lay, that he write “a big concert work on the subject of the air-force.”²⁵ Because Lay had already encouraged Blitzstein to think about how he could apply his musical talent productively, Blitzstein had started planning earlier that month to write a “big work” that would be “adopted to propaganda purposes for the Air Force.”²⁶ It would be, he said, “a big throw.”²⁷ Following Blitzstein’s proposal, Colonel Lay arranged for the composer to receive a promotion from private to corporal to ensure that he had enough time to compose. For several months, Blitzstein was freed from military duties and lived with a friend in London while working on his symphony. Barber’s experience was similar. After submitting a proposal to the army to write a symphony about flight in August 1943, he was transferred to the headquarters of the Air Force in Fort Worth, Texas, where he was put in contact with General Barton Yount, who proved enthusiastic about Barber’s proposed project. In order to guarantee that the composer had the best working conditions possible, Yount assigned him to West Point and allowed him to work from his home in Mount Kisco, New York.²⁸

It is not clear how much either composer knew about the other’s project. Though Blitzstein proposed his symphony eight months before Barber did, it was not yet

early 1940s, Shostakovich requested scores and parts of Barber’s orchestral music, and in 1949 Barber was disappointed not to meet Shostakovich when he was in New York. The two finally met in Moscow in 1962, when Barber was invited to attend a meeting of the Congress of Soviet Composers. See Heyman, *Composer*, 212, 237n, 414.

23 Howard Pollack, *Marc Blitzstein: His Life, His Work, His World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 285.

24 Gibbs, “Phenomenon,” 99–103. According to Gibbs, “The Seventh soon faded from American concert life, especially from the repertory of the leading orchestras;” but then, “after decades of near oblivion in America, performances and recordings of the symphony surged in the 1990s,” partly owing to the reassessment of Shostakovich’s politics in the wake of Solomon Volkov’s *Testimony* and Ian MacDonald’s *The New Shostakovich*.

25 Pollack, *Blitzstein*, 282.

26 Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 261.

27 Pollack, *Blitzstein*, 282.

28 Heyman, *Composer*, 212–218.

publicized, and Barber is unlikely to have heard about it (though he may have been aware of Blitzstein's *Freedom Morning*, a work for chorus and orchestra composed and premiered in 1943). But as Barber wrote to his uncle, Sidney Homer, the subject of flight "is of great fascination to the public and is being celebrated in all the arts." The two composers may therefore have simply landed on the same subject independently.²⁹ Fauser notes that the public at the time was captivated with the exploits of Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh. Flight-themed pieces of music from the early twentieth century, meanwhile, include Leo Ornstein's *Suicide in an Airplane*, George Antheil's *Airplane Sonata*, Elie Siegmeister's *Toccata on Flight Rhythms*, and Kurt Weill's *Der Lindberghflug*. And flight was in the news: the Royal Air Force helped Britain repel the threat of German invasion in the Battle of Britain in 1940, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, recognizing the important role air power would play in the incipient war, spurred heavy investment in the Army Air Forces in the summer of 1941.³⁰

In proposing to write music, Blitzstein was not seeking to avoid his military duties. He was enthusiastic about the war, and upon enlisting, he hoped to get as close to the front as possible. Pollack explains that Blitzstein's dedication to the war stemmed in part from his political alignment with communism. Blitzstein saw the war as "a great moral struggle, a fight not only against fascism, but for the common man, part of a struggle, in his estimation, that had predated the war and that would continue afterwards." Furthermore, as Pollack suggests, "all diplomatic and military cooperation between the Western democracies and the Soviet Union especially delighted him."³¹ His politics closely aligned with contemporaneous ideals, when, as Elizabeth Crist explains, "many on the Left looked to complete the unfinished project of American democracy" through the Second World War by using the social change effected by the Civil War as their model. For them, Crist explains, "the New Deal was to be a second emancipation, the war against fascism to usher in a second reconstruction of American democracy and inaugurate the century of the common man."³² Even before he enlisted, Blitzstein believed that music could be harnessed to the war effort. Writing for *The New York Times* in 1942, he argued that "in a time of war everybody, everything must do a job. Music no less than machine-guns has a part to play, and can be a weapon in the battle for a free world."³³ To this end, he planned for the *Airborne* Symphony to have particular appeal to his fellow soldiers, and he originally hoped that its chorus would consist of military personnel. As he wrote to Copland, "I wrote [the symphony] for those kids you

29 Quoted in Heyman, *Composer*, 216. Though no longer novel, flight continues to be depicted in the twenty-first century in works such as William Bolcom's *Inventing Flight*, and Ricky Ian Gordon's "Night Flight to San Francisco," from his opera *Angels in America*.

30 R. A. C. Parker, "Britain, Battle of," *Oxford Companion to British History*, second ed., *Oxford Reference Online*, accessed April 13, 2018; Tami Davis Biddle, "Air Force, U.S.: Predecessors of, 1907–46," *Oxford Companion to American Military History*, *Oxford Reference Online*, accessed April 13, 2018.

31 Pollack, *Blitzstein*, 270–271.

32 Elizabeth Crist, *Music for the Common Man: Aaron Copland during the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 148–149.

33 Marc Blitzstein, "Composers Doing Their Stuff," *The New York Times*, May 3, 1942.

see walking along the streets here wearing their jaunty wings. And if they like it ... why I'll consider it a job well done."³⁴ Copland likely read Blitzstein's missive positively, for, whether consciously or not, Blitzstein followed Copland's 1940 injunction in the pages of the journal *Twice a Year*: "It is not a time for poignantly subjective lieder, but a time for large mass choral singing. It is the composer who must embody new communal ideals in a new communal music."³⁵

The result of Blitzstein's efforts, an hour-long work scored for orchestra, speaker, tenor, bass, and male chorus, is difficult to categorize. Blitzstein described the *Airborne* Symphony in a variety of ways, including "lyric symphony," "ballad symphony," "dramatic oratorio," "oratorio," "dramatic suite," and "tone poem."³⁶ To these labels, later commentators have added "cantata," "symphony-cantata," and "dramatic cantata."³⁷ The work has few direct counterparts, though in its use of speaker and chorus, and in its patriotic sheen, it resembles both Copland's *Lincoln Portrait* and William Schuman's *A Free Song (Secular Cantata No. 2)*.³⁸ Eric Gordon has also suggested that Blitzstein was familiar with British composer Inglis Gundry's *Five Bells*, a work for chorus and orchestra based on the composer's experiences in the Royal Navy.³⁹ As with many of his dramatic works, Blitzstein wrote the libretto for the *Airborne* Symphony himself. The piece consists twelve movements grouped into three sections: the first part outlines the history of flight, from Mesopotamian legends to the Wright brothers; the second depicts the destructive use of air power by the Axis countries; and the third celebrates the energy and resolve of the Allied air forces (see Figure 1).

Part I	1. Theory of Flight
	2. Ballad of History and Mythology
	3. Kitty Hawk
	4. The Airborne
Part II	5. The Enemy
	6. Threat and Approach
	7. Ballad of the Cities
	8. Morning Poem
Part III	9. Air Force. Ballad of Hurry-Up
	10. Night Music. Ballad of the Bombardier
	11. Recitative. Chorus of the Rendezvous
	12. The Open Sky

Figure 1: Order of movements in Blitzstein's *Airborne* Symphony

34 Pollack, *Blitzstein*, 283.

35 Crist, *Common Man*, 148.

36 Pollack, *Blitzstein*, 285.

37 K. Robert Schwarz, "Grandiose Patriotic Fervor Soaked in Jazz, Blues, and Pop," *The New York Times*, April 30, 1995; Olin Downes, "Audience Cheers Blitzstein Work," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1946; Tawa, *Great American Symphony*, 137.

38 Blitzstein may not have heard the former and could not have heard the latter, however, before leaving the United States for London.

39 Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 277.
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One of the work's most striking features, a spoken, unaccompanied poem recited at the end of the second part, indicates that Blitzstein viewed the text as an essential, and perhaps even the predominant, element of the composition.⁴⁰

Blitzstein employs a colorful percussion section, including a wind machine, wood blocks, and a ratchet, in order to evoke mechanized flight. Moreover, the *Airborne* Symphony is an exuberant agglomeration of musical styles, ranging from big band to folk to classical. In writing about the symphony's premiere for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Virgil Thomson compared Blitzstein's musical style to theatrical staging, writing,

He sets stylistic formulas against one another in much the same way that a stage director will turn on his scene spotlights, floodlights, footlights, and borders, composing these for expressive purpose rather than for any mere display of his equipment.⁴¹

Listeners could just as easily draw a link to film scores. By this time in his career, Blitzstein had completed eight film scores and even briefly considered incorporating a motion picture element into the *Airborne* Symphony. The opening of the seventh movement, "Ballad of the Cities," demonstrates how Blitzstein liberally deploys different musical styles to shift affect and setting. At the beginning of the movement, the speaker intones the names of cities damaged by Axis air raids. The steady meter, dark timbres, and modally inflected minor key suggest a funeral march, adding gravitas to the text. The impression of film music is strongest here—the listener can easily imagine a camera panning over images of destroyed cities as the music plays. With the entry of the chorus, the funeral march transforms into a requiem, as the music takes on a religious air. Blitzstein then stages an intimate moment: the global gives way to the local as the chorus gives way to a tenor and bass duet, wherein the two soloists describe the mangled shell of a bombed house. Here, the stepwise, modal melody evokes folk music, amplifying the domestic setting of the house. But with a sweeping gesture, the strings usher in a forceful orchestral interlude that returns the listener to the broad canvas of Europe. The suggestions of film, sacred, and folk music found here are not isolated to "Ballad of the Cities." In "Ballad of the Bombardier," in which a young pilot writes a letter home to his sweetheart, Blitzstein employs a folk idiom to convey the man's homesickness; and in the final movement, the victorious "Open Sky," he uses the chorus and chimes to create a religious atmosphere, musically affirming the moral rightness of the Allied cause.

Blitzstein thus fully committed himself to making his impressions of the Air Force discernible to listeners in the *Airborne* Symphony. The degree to which the idea of flight or the war informed Barber's composition of his Second Symphony, by contrast, is unclear and contested. Unlike Blitzstein, Barber did not voluntarily enlist in the army, and his proposal for a symphony came partly out of a desire to escape from what he

40 Blitzstein used spoken text in both *The Cradle Will Rock* and *No for an Answer*, but in those cases it is used to advance the narrative. In the *Airborne* Symphony, however, Blitzstein treats "Morning Poem" as the equal of its neighboring movements.

41 Virgil Thomson, "Good Music, Poor Literature," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 2, 1946.

found to be an onerous desk job.⁴² Once he secured support for his proposal, though, Barber launched himself enthusiastically into the project. While in Fort Worth, Barber spoke with pilots who returned from combat about their “various mental problems and fears,” even reporting to his uncle that,

Many pilots talked about the sensation of flying, the lack of musical climax in flying, the unrelieved tension, the crescendo of descent rather than mounting, and the discovery of a new dimension. How to put this in music, I do not know.... In some way I will try to express some of their emotions.⁴³

Barber also accompanied pilots on training runs several times, including at least once in the dark. His flight at night may have contributed to his decision to score the second movement with an electronic tone generator, which was created expressly for the symphony. The machine was designed to imitate the sound of a radio beam, which Barber characterized as, “the only connection with civilization down below” during nighttime flights.⁴⁴

Shortly after completing the symphony, Barber described it as following to his uncle: “The first movement tries to express the dynamism and excitement of flying—and ends way up 50,000 feet! The second ... might be called a solo flight at night.”⁴⁵ Then, he reportedly told the *Christian Science Monitor* that “he had not tried to depict anything as tremendous as the whole Air Force or the heat of battle, but had applied himself solely to the story of the pilot himself.”⁴⁶ Yet, at the symphony’s Boston premiere, Barber disavowed any sort of program, and the program notes for the evening cautioned the audience that the composer had “made no attempt to describe a scene or tell a story.”⁴⁷ Barber’s adamant rejection of a program for the symphony was perhaps an attempt to prevent it from being characterized as a “war symphony.” In his dissertation on Barber’s war years, Jeffrey Marsh Wright demonstrates that composers including William Schuman, George Antheil, and David Diamond made similar efforts to keep their war-inspired works relevant outside the context of the conflict.⁴⁸ Wright suggests that Barber resisted a programmatic interpretation of his new symphony specifically because he

42 Heyman, *Composer*, 212. Barber held a desk job because of his poor eyesight. In Heyman’s opinion, “Barber’s low appetite for military duty was not for lack of patriotism but rather out of a desire to continue writing music.”

43 Quoted in Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: A Thematic Catalog of the Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 247–248.

44 Heyman, *Composer*, 219.

45 Heyman, *Thematic Catalog*, 250.

46 Haddock, “Boston Hears Symphony.”

47 Quoted in Jeffrey Marsh Wright, “The Enlisted Composer: Samuel Barber’s Career, 1942–1945” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010), 68.

48 *Ibid.*, 82–85.

did not want it to be perceived by the public as propaganda.⁴⁹ If Wright's reading of the situation is correct, however, then Barber was being somewhat disingenuous—in 1942 he wrote to his friend Katherine Chapin, “It is strange that they do not use us composers more than they do for propaganda.”⁵⁰ At the same time, Heyman observed that Barber was resistant to programmatic interpretations even those of his works with literary allusions, such as *Music for a Scene from Shelley* and the overture to *The School for Scandal*.⁵¹ Barber took pains to clarify that the latter work was not program music, but rather “a musical reflection of the play's *spirit*.”⁵² Critic L. A. Sloper took this same approach in his review of the Second Symphony: “Without attempting to tell a story,” he wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the symphony “undoubtedly reflects emotions raised by the composer's serving in the Army Air Forces.”⁵³ *New York Times* critic Olin Downes, however, found Barber's denial of a program “a trifle casuistic,” citing Barber's use of the tone generator to suggest a radio beam.⁵⁴

Regardless of whether the Second Symphony should be labeled as programmatic, impressions of flying, such as those described by Barber to his uncle, manifest themselves in the music. The first movement ends in the high register of the orchestra, with violins sustaining soft, high notes above recollections of earlier themes in the winds and piano. By ending the movement in this way, Barber echoes the experiences of the pilots who described the feeling of crescendo in descent rather than ascent. The high-register ending also suggests that the metaphorical flight is still in progress, thus narratively justifying the second movement, which is alleged to depict flying at night.⁵⁵ In the third movement, Barber brings the listener back to the

Example 1. Barber, Symphony No. 2, third movement, m. 1. ©1950 by G. Schirmer Inc.



49 Ibid., 69.

50 Heyman, *Composer*, 212.

51 Ibid., 86–87.

52 Quoted in *ibid.*, 87 (italics original). Despite Barber's best efforts to deflect claims of program music, even his friend Robert Horan described *Music for a Scene from Shelley* and Overture to *The School for Scandal* as “programmatic, incidental music” in a portrait of Barber written for *Modern Music* in 1943. See Horan, “American Composers XIX: Samuel Barber,” *Modern Music* 20, no. 3 (March–April 1943): 162.

53 L. A. Sloper, “Barber's Second Symphony at First Hearing,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 4, 1944.

54 Olin Downes, “New Barber Work Honors Air Forces,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 1944.

55 Heyman, *Composer*, 219.

ground. Barber was reported to have described the beginning of the third movement as representing a spiral, an effect he achieves by eliminating bar lines (one of only two times he does so in the piece) and by quickly shifting between registers (see example 1).⁵⁶

The idea of a spiral recalls Barber's description of a harrowing flight he took in Fort Worth. During his stay, he accompanied pilots in a practice session in a Liberator bomber. As Barber later described, "I thought we would fly over Texas, possibly lunching somewhere and returning in style." In the event, he got far more than he expected. "We banked, we twisted and twisted, we turned, we dived, then the young pilots, who seemed almost too young and too small for the huge machine—they were only twenty-five—flew blindfolded." Despite the lack of an elegant luncheon, Barber reported that the experience "was fun in a raucous sort of way."⁵⁷

More significant than how the act of flying itself informed the Second Symphony's composition is the role of the Air Force. Barber regularly reported on the composition's progress to a colonel at West Point, who encouraged Barber to incorporate modern, progressive elements into his symphony to reflect the modernity of the Air Force.⁵⁸ The colonel's request inspired Barber to incorporate the tone-generator into the second movement. Because the machine belied his denial of the symphony's programmatic elements, however, Barber remained ambivalent about the device, and he eventually replaced it with an E-flat clarinet in the 1947 revision of the symphony.⁵⁹ Barber incorporated modern musical language into the symphony more successfully. When compared to Barber's previous compositional output, this symphony's musical materials are remarkably terse and jagged. At the beginning of the war, Barber was deemed stylistically conservative in comparison to many of his American peers.⁶⁰ His musical training with Scalerò was traditional and strict, and unlike many of his contemporaries, who looked to early twentieth-century France for inspiration, Barber looked to late nineteenth-century Italy and Germany. A few of Barber's early works, including the last movement of the Violin Concerto and the Second Essay incorporate harmonic dissonance and rhythmic irregularity, but these elements come across as digressions in essentially lyrical contexts.

By contrast, however, the Second Symphony, is permeated with dissonant harmonies, angular melodies, and significant use of percussion, all of which suggest a new direction in Barber's musical thinking. Prior to the symphony's premiere, the composer told the *Christian Science Monitor*, "I have not been confined in any limitations of techniques.... I have felt free to use any devices which I considered

56 Ibid., 223.

57 Ibid., 216–217.

58 Ibid., 219.

59 Unfortunately, no recording of the original version with the tone generator exists, to my knowledge.

60 Tawa, *Great American Symphony*, 130.

would best express the mood, the adventure, the vivid action of the individual army flying man.”⁶¹ The opening major seconds of the first movement quickly indicate that, despite the movement’s traditional sonata form, the Second Symphony is far different from its predecessors. Furthermore, the end of the development section of the first movement is notable within Barber’s oeuvre for its lack of tonal center and its stringent, percussive effect.

Several works following the Second Symphony, including *Capricorn Concerto*, the Cello Concerto, and the Piano Sonata, Op. 26, share its propensity for dissonant melodic leaps, asymmetrical rhythms, and changes in meter, and in the Piano Sonata, Barber even experiments with twelve-tone technique. Listeners today cannot say conclusively whether the Air Force played a role in pushing Barber toward a new style—he may very well have explored these musical elements without the impetus of the war—but the evidence is nevertheless suggestive. The pressure from the Air Force for a modernist symphony, coupled with the Air Force’s reputation as the most technologically advanced branch of the army, may have spurred Barber to extend his musical language. His experience in the service may have influenced his development as a composer and made possible some of his later compositions. It is also interesting that, in admitting greater harmonic and rhythmic complexity into his music, Barber was taking an opposite path from many American composers at this time. The tendency toward simplicity by American composers such as Copland and Thomson during the Depression has already been noted, and most maintained such a style through the war.

Blitzstein, too, was concerned with reaching a wide audience, and a deliberately pared-down style was one of many he adopted as the situation called for. And while several scholars have noted the role of the war in encouraging Copland to maintain a simplified style, Crist goes even further by writing, “Copland’s attitude toward a new degree of accessibility in concert music was undoubtedly influenced by the [admiring] description of Soviet music in the pages of *Modern Music* as well as his involvement in the Communist movement.”⁶² While Barber’s political ideology remains difficult to discern, he certainly was not a communist. Indeed, Benedict Taylor has characterized Barber’s political attitude as being “marked by a ‘non-ideological’ humanitarianism,” writing:

Whereas Barber was perhaps sympathetic to the plight of the less fortunate and downtrodden ... he was hardly a paid-up leftist nor even politically engaged. Rather, his aesthetic and (broadly) political views were characterized by a belief in the autonomy of the individual and a somewhat Romantic subjectivity.⁶³

61 Haddock, “Boston Hears Symphony.”

62 Crist, *Common Man*, 178.

63 Benedict Taylor, “Nostalgia and Cultural Memory in Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*,” *Journal of Musicology* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 226.

Barber is thus unlikely to have the fight abroad in World War II with the fight of the working class at home, as Blitzstein and Copland did.⁶⁴ And though Barber almost certainly would not have expressed his thoughts as such, it is intriguing to speculate about whether, like Crist, Barber perceived in his fellow Americans' newfound interest in musical simplicity a political statement, one with which he did not want to be associated.

In any case, Barber's approach to modernism has some interesting similarities with Blitzstein's *Airborne*. The opening gesture of Barber's symphony, which is characterized by dotted rhythms and harmonic major seconds, bears a striking resemblance to the "Kitty Hawk" movement of Blitzstein's *Airborne*. Both movements contain passages with shrill seconds in the upper strings and winds and feature dramatic shifts in register (see example 2).

Example 2a. Barber, Symphony No. 2, first movement, mm. 1–5. ©1950 by G. Schirmer Inc.

Allegro ma non troppo (♩ = 69)
Woodwinds and piano

Upper strings

64 For a discussion of the politics of Copland and several other of Barber's contemporaries, see Howard Pollack, "An Engaged Citizen," chap. 16 in *Aaron Copland: The Life and Work of an Uncommon Man* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 270–287.

Example 2b. Blitzstein, *Airborne* Symphony, “Kitty Hawk,” mm. 5–10, transcription from photocopy of holograph of draft vocal score manuscript, New York Public Library.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Kitty Hawk" from Blitzstein's *Airborne* Symphony. It is a transcription of a draft vocal score manuscript. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system features "Upper woodwinds" on the top staff and "Low strings and winds" on the bottom staff. The second system features "+ Upper strings" on the top staff and "Low strings and winds" on the bottom staff. Dynamics include *mf*, *f*, and *accel.* (accelerando). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Barber’s use of the tone generator also has a counterpart of sorts in Blitzstein’s use of a solo ratchet, meant to depict war machinery in the fifth movement of *Airborne*, titled, “The Enemy.” These examples show how the two composers, whose previous compositional idioms were tonal and tuneful, reached for recognizably “modern” sounds in their symphonies to depict mechanized warfare, and potentially to depict flight as well. When they wrote their symphonies, commercial air travel was limited, and the airplane would have been a novel, modern craft to many audiences in 1940s America. It is important, however, to distinguish between Barber’s modernisms, which define his symphony’s character, and Blitzstein’s, which are used to set certain scenes. Unlike Barber, Blitzstein embraced a range of musical styles, switching between them whenever necessary. By the time Blitzstein wrote his score for the film *Valley Town: A Study of Machines and Men* in 1940, “mechanistic gestures” had already been a part of his musical vocabulary, according to Pollack.⁶⁵

Both pieces also share depictions of pilots during night flights. While the dramatic situations are not identical—Barber’s pilot is actually in the air while Blitzstein’s is writing a letter during a blackout in England—they share musical similarities. Both movements open with solo woodwind melodies above lush string chords. The timbral disparity between the woodwinds and strings, coupled with the isolated woodwind

⁶⁵ Pollack, *Blitzstein*, 246.

parts above the densely populated string section, creates a strong sense of solitude, suggesting a lonely flyer above the clouds (see example 3). Again, it is interesting that both composers use similar imagery and compositional technique to create contrasts in mood within their symphonies. In both cases, the focus on a solo instrument is dramatically effective because it evokes a subject matter far more personal and relatable to listeners. In drawing these comparisons, the author does not wish to suggest that either composer was aware of what the other was writing—only that the similarities between the two symphonies demonstrate how, for all their differences as composers, Barber and Blitzstein occasionally share musical and dramatic impulses.

Example 3a. Barber, *Symphony No. 2*, second movement, mm. 8–12. ©1950 by G. Schirmer Inc

The musical score for Example 3a consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the English horn, featuring a melodic line with a long, sweeping phrase that spans across the measures. The lower staff is for the muted low strings, playing a rhythmic accompaniment of chords. Dynamic markings include *pp* (pianissimo) for the strings, *mp* (mezzo-piano) for the English horn, and *molto espr.* (molto espressivo) for the English horn's phrase.

Example 3b. Blitzstein, *Airborne Symphony*, “Night Music: Ballad of the Bombardier,” mm. 1–4. Transcription from photocopy of holograph of draft vocal score manuscript, New York Public Library.

The musical score for Example 3b consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the solo clarinet, playing a melodic line with some triplet figures. The lower staff is for the muted strings, providing a harmonic accompaniment. Dynamic markings include *p* (piano) for the clarinet and *pp* (pianissimo) for the strings. The score is in 4/4 time and features a key signature of two sharps (D major or F# minor).

Because both symphonies were products of idiosyncratic circumstances rather than some sort of organized commissioning program, they were never performed together by the Air Force; few listeners of the 1940s would have had the opportunity to compare the two works. At their premieres, both works were enthusiastically received, and their connections to the Air Force were celebrated by audiences and critics alike. Serge Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the first performance of Barber’s *Second Symphony* on March 3, 1944, and in New York a week later. Early reviews were generally positive, heralding the symphony as “close-knit and concise,”

“clear and strong,” and “ambitious.”⁶⁶ Copland thought the piece “showed [Barber] to be getting less stuffy,” and for Vincent Persichetti, it “mark[ed] Barber’s first venture into truly creative composition.”⁶⁷ Writing in *Modern Music*, Moses Smith articulated a connection between Barber’s change in style and the war: “In this work, dedicated to the Army Air Forces, Barber strikes out boldly and admirably on a new path.... It is of our time, and that means time of war.”⁶⁸ Blitzstein’s *Airborne* Symphony also garnered positive reviews upon its premiere. Owing to Blitzstein’s work for the OWI and the increased pace of the war in Europe in 1944 and 1945, the symphony was not performed until April 1946, when Leonard Bernstein led the New York City Symphony in a performance featuring Orson Welles as speaker. In a review for *The New York Times*, Downes praised the symphony, calling it “a significant score” and “first-class theater,” and reported that the audience received the work well.⁶⁹ According to Pollack, the occasion was “one of the great popular successes of Blitzstein’s career.”⁷⁰

Yet despite their initial triumphs, both symphonies have fallen into obscurity since the war. In the case of the Barber, this is due partly to its unavailability for twenty years. After revising the symphony in 1947, Barber gradually grew dissatisfied with it, eventually withdrawing it from his catalog in 1964 and destroying the parts. Copies of the score survived in libraries, but the lack of parts discouraged performance. Several years after Barber’s death in 1981, a set of parts were found in a London warehouse, and the symphony is once again available to orchestras.⁷¹ But the work has also suffered because of its association with the war. Hans Heinsheimer, Barber’s publisher at G. Schirmer, believed that Barber withdrew the work “because he wrote it under duress.”⁷² Yet Barber never implied being unhappy while writing the symphony, and in fact thought it his best work when he finished it.⁷³ Even so, writing fifty years apart, Thomson and Pollack agree that, “Barber was not temperamentally suited for the strong

66 Downes, “New Barber Work” and Sloper, “Barber’s Second Symphony.”

67 Copland to Minna Lederman, Tepoztlan, Mexico, October 6, 1944, in *The Selected Correspondence of Aaron Copland*, ed. Elizabeth B. Crist and Wayne Shirley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 169–170; Vincent Persichetti, “Current Chronicle: Philadelphia,” *The Music Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April 1949): 296.

68 Moses Smith, “Americans and Shostakovitch in Boston,” *Modern Music* 21, no. 4 (May-June 1944): 252.

69 Downes, “Audience Cheers Blitzstein Work,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 1946.

70 Pollack, *Blitzstein*, 290.

71 The set of parts was for the revised 1947 version of the symphony. G. Schirmer reissued the full score in 1989.

72 Hans Heinsheimer, interview by Peter Dickinson, New York City, May 13, 1981, in *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute*, ed. Peter Dickinson (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 159–160.

73 Wright, “Enlisted Composer,” 69.

public statement that the times called for.”⁷⁴ The composer himself justified withdrawing the work on the grounds that “times of cataclysm are rarely conducive to the creation of good music, especially when the composer tries to say too much.”⁷⁵ And though the symphony enjoys somewhat more esteem today, having received three commercial recordings since its resurrection in the 1980s, there remains a nagging sense that it is, as one critic recently put it, “middle-drawer Barber.”⁷⁶ Blitzstein’s *Airborne* Symphony did enjoy some popularity in the decade after the war, but has since been dubbed “dated,” “hokum,” a “period piece,” and more poetically, “a faded bouquet of corn flowers.”⁷⁷ Writing in 1976—only a year after America’s ignominious exit from Vietnam—*New York Times* critic Donal Henahan was quite frank when he mentioned that the Air Force having commissioned the symphony was “a strike against it immediately.”⁷⁸

In 1995, Leon Botstein thoughtfully questioned, “Fifty years after [the end of the WWII], why do some works written in those years still speak to us and others not, despite a shared and attractive noble purpose?”⁷⁹ Barber and Blitzstein’s symphonies capture Botstein’s dilemma well, but provide no clear answers. Modern listeners are familiar with the evils of state-controlled music in the Soviet Union and other totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and are consequently suspicious of music written under the auspices of government; and, after Vietnam and subsequent wars, some Americans now distrust the military as well. How today’s audiences perceive music is inevitably colored by their beliefs and experiences—they cannot hear or judge these symphonies exactly as audiences of the 1940s did. Yet whatever the symphonies’ musical or political merits, listeners should remember two things. Firstly, both symphonies were written in earnest. Even those critics who mock the *Airborne* Symphony should acknowledge that, as Downes observed after its premiere, Blitzstein “puts something over the footlights that he strongly believes in, and he drives this home with all the musical and dramatic power he can summon.”⁸⁰ Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, both symphonies

74 Howard Pollack, review of Samuel Barber, *Second Symphony*, Op. 19, New York: G. Schirmer (Hal Leonard), 1950 (reissued 1990), *Notes* 47, no. 3 (March 1991): 959. Thomson’s perspective is similar: “I am inclined to think that the commission to write a work glorifying the Army Air Forces has led [Barber] to try his hand at a publicitary task for which he has little taste and less preparation” (“Music: More Barber,” *New York Herald Tribune*, March 10, 1944).

75 Heyman, *Composer*, 230.

76 Allan Kozinn, “Populism and High Art in Concordia Bill,” *The New York Times*, October 27, 1991.

77 Allan Kozinn, “A Program Served with a Side of Wings,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2010; Bernard Holland, “3 Works from 3 Countries at War’s End,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1995; K. Robert Schwarz, “Grandiose Patriotic Fervor”; Donal Henahan, “Music View: A ‘Ruptured Duck’ That Just Will Not Fly,” *New York Times*, August 15, 1976.

78 Donal Henahan, “Ruptured Duck,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 1976.

79 Leon Botstein, “After Fifty Years: Thoughts on Music and the End of World War II,” *Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 230.

80 Downes, “Audience Cheers.”

are reminders of an era in which classical music was valued by a broad swath of the population, from military generals and newspaper critics to army privates and laymen. Contrary to Donal Henahan, who, with his post-Vietnam perspective, thought America's World War II-era music "a national embarrassment," I find that this music reflects an idealistic society, one that believed classical music could be a small but vital part of the war effort.⁸¹ That America's senior military officials had enough faith in music's power to effect change that they commissioned symphonies from two leading composers is notable; that they initiated the many other musical projects described above is equally laudable and impressive. Even those who would cast a skeptical eye toward the wartime symphonies of Barber and Blitzstein, then, should not discount their generation's belief in the potent, transformative power of music.

About the author

American composer Ross S. Griffey is the recipient of several national and regional awards, including an ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer Award, first prize in the Voices of Change/ Dallas Symphony Orchestra Texas Young Composers Project, and winner of the New York Composers Circle Competition. Recent and notable performances of his work include the premiere of *Essay*, for orchestra, by the Juilliard Orchestra and Jeffrey Milarsky; a staged version of *Three Whitman Songs*, for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble, by the Secret Opera; and a performance of *A Catalogue of Agonies* as part of an installation piece by the California-based artist and musician Julie Zhu. As a composer, Mr. Griffey has participated in festivals including June in Buffalo, in New York, and the Conservatoire Américain, in Fontainebleau, France. As a writer he attended the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism in San Francisco in 2016.

A native of Houston, Texas, Mr. Griffey studied first at Rice University, with composers Pierre Jalbert and Shih-Hui Chen, and later at the Juilliard School, with composers Samuel Adler and Robert Beaser. Mr. Griffey recently earned his doctorate from Juilliard, authoring an award-winning dissertation on support for composers by the National Endowment for the Arts. Mr. Griffey is currently an Albi Rosenthal Visiting Fellow in Music at the Bodleian Libraries, where he is researching nineteenth-century arctic exploration in order to write a new song cycle for the Oxford Lieder Festival; and his other active projects include a new work for chamber orchestra that will be premiered in New York by Joel Sachs and the New Juilliard Ensemble in April 2019.

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⁸¹ Henahan, "Ruptured Duck."

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