

This dynamic is especially poignant for younger audiences born after the 1980s had passed, who experience the decade through cultural artifacts and second-hand memories. Hipster culture is a driving force in retro trends, mobilizing (in addition to its ironic mode) a redemptive imitation of the past that seeks to recirculate “forgotten objects for genuine aesthetic enjoyment.”³ Dixon and Stein, in their commitment to eighties musical technology and style, respond not only to their own nostalgic impulses but also to a broader cultural impulse to recirculate past treasures. This is part of the wide appeal of *Stranger Things* and its soundtrack: its nostalgic moves captivate both older audiences who remember the eighties first-hand and younger audiences who value rearticulating the past in the present.

Stranger Things' first-season soundtrack was released as two volumes across several platforms—digital, CD, and vinyl. As with most contemporary popular music and soundtrack albums, the liner notes are sparse; the CD albums provide only track listings, a primary credits list, and a few promotional photographs from the series. The most compelling marketing decision was the release of both volumes on cassette tape, complete with retro sleeves designed to imitate old VHS covers, a move that highlights yet again the series' fixation on eighties pop culture commodities. Although the series' homage to the decade can by nature be only an imitation, Dixon and Stein's vintage synthwave scoring has captivated *Stranger Things*' audiences, allowing them to engage—again and anew—with treasured musical objects and styles of the past.

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Samuel Barber: Absolute Beauty. H. Paul Moon, director. Zen Violence Films LLC, (2017), 130 minutes. DVD and streaming.

Producer–director H. Paul Moon's sensitive documentary, *Absolute Beauty* (2017), pays homage to one of the United States' best-known composers, Samuel Barber (1910–1981). Moon began this labor of love during the 2010 Barber centennial, with the idea of creating a film structured around rehearsals and performances of the composer's music. Because Moon drew on music making in the D.C. metropolitan area, his home turf, it took him considerable time and effort to line up enough performances to create the sort of full-length documentary he had in mind, and he did not complete the film until 2016. First presented in Cologne that year, the picture subsequently made its way to various film festivals, winning awards for best documentary at the 2017 Plebeian International Film Festival in San Diego and for best director at the 2017 Royal Starr Film Festival in Royal Oaks, Michigan.

³ Bjørn Schiermer, “Late-Modern Hipsters: New Tendencies in Popular Culture,” *Acta Sociologica* 57, no. 2 (2014): 174.

The documentary has no voiceover narration but rather assumes its shape and meaning from the presentation of filmed excerpts—largely rehearsal footage—of a number of Barber’s works in chronological order, mostly milestone pieces from *Dover Beach* (1931) to *Despite and Still* (1969). In addition, Moon filmed an episode about the 1962 Piano Concerto not included in the film but available on the documentary’s companion website as a bonus clip.¹ In the end, this choice of repertoire left the Second Symphony, commissioned by the U.S. Army while Barber served in World War II and one of the composer’s few major undertakings, unrepresented. This omission is understandable, given the work’s obscurity, but regrettable nonetheless, for it deprives some consideration of Barber’s wartime service.

Moon complements these excerpts with historic recorded interviews by Menotti, Copland, and others as well as more recent remarks by various performers, composers, and writers, including Barber authorities Barbara Heyman and Pierre Brévignon, both of whom further assisted Moon as consulting producers. Most of the archival recorded commentary draws on broadcasts transcribed and edited by Peter Dickinson in his excellent *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute*.² But, as heard in the film, the taped interviews do not always correspond exactly to Dickinson’s transcriptions. For example, the film includes an intriguing discussion by Charles Turner about Barber’s identity as a gay man that Dickinson chose not to include in his book. Meanwhile, the Bernstein excerpt, taken from a radio broadcast on the occasion of Barber’s seventieth birthday, has, as far as I know, never appeared in print in any form; his interesting remarks, heard at the start of the film, about Barber’s Platonic attempts “to form one version or another of absolute beauty,” provided the documentary with its apt title.

Moon prepared this film after most of Barber’s closest friends and associates had died, so information about Barber’s private world must be gleaned largely from the old recorded interviews already largely transcribed by Dickinson. An exception, the pianist Jean-Pierre Marty relating a squabble he had with Barber about a provocative Christmas card that John Corigliano had sent to the Barber–Menotti household, offers something newly revealing, in contrast to the many familiar accounts. Moreover, Thomas Larsen especially talks about Barber’s romantic relationship with Menotti, but discourse remains focused on the music. Concerning this, conductors Marin Alsop and Leonard Slatkin, long associated with Barber’s work, have particularly insightful things to say; both express admiration for the composer’s well-known economy of means, and Alsop also lauds his orchestrations—in particular, his superb writing for the oboe.

As its underlying theme, the film presents the notion that Barber’s music embodies melancholy *par excellence*. This naturally comes to the fore with discussions of *Adagio for Strings* (1936) and remarks by Thomas Larsen, J. Reilly Larsen, and Leonard Slatkin, the last of whom speaks movingly about collapsing, “shattered,” after performing *Adagio* at a Proms concert a few days after 9/11. Such commentary also surfaces elsewhere in other contexts. Composer Jordan Kuspa, for

¹ See <http://samuelbarberfilm.com/category/bonus>.

² Peter Dickinson, ed. *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010).

instance, states, “I think Barber is one of the great composers of melancholic music,” and composer Calvin Bowin admits how Barber’s music revealed for him the possibility “to explore the recesses of your heart. And sometimes those places are a little sadder, but there’s beauty to be found in those recesses.” The advertising copy on the back cover of the DVD even states, “This film is a probing exploration of his [Barber’s] music and melancholia.”

Moon underlines such a perspective in other ways. In the sequence on the *Hermit Songs* (1953), for example, the film includes three of the cycle’s most doleful songs—“At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” “The Crucifixion,” and “The Desire for Hermitage”—as opposed to the tender “St Ita’s Vision,” the adorable “The Monk and His Cat,” or the rollicking “The Praises of God.” This attention to Barber’s melancholy—as in Thomas Larsen’s book, *The Saddest Music Ever Written* (Pegasus, 2010)—no doubt helps advance a particular viewpoint, but it leaves in the shadows Barber’s biting wit, gleeful humor, and other modes of expression as found in various pieces or sections of pieces. Virgil Thomson at least offers an antidote to the prevailing solemnity by talking about *Adagio* as a “detailed love scene” and slyly adding, with respect to Barber’s choral arrangement of *Adagio* as *Agnus Dei*, with a laugh, “So you make an *Agnus Dei* out of it, it’ll work! But there’s an awful lot of rubbing around.”

Viewers should not expect much in the way of a history lesson, not only because of the dearth of factual information and exposition (although Heyman helpfully fills in some gaps) but also because of the film’s neglect of broader contexts, including the rather blanket exclusion of other composers and artists. One might walk away from the film thinking Barber the time’s only composer with romantic inclinations—as if William Walton, Francis Poulenc, Howard Hanson, and many others, including Gian Carlo Menotti, never existed. Nor does Barber’s subtle and highly elegant absorption of modernist trends, including the twelve-tone method, feature much in the telling. More of a rumination and appreciation than a scholarly or academic enterprise, the film, however, succeeds admirably on its own terms.

The performances on display involve professional and semi-professional musicians and ensembles alike, and as one would expect, are not all at the same level of polish. The excerpts of *Medea’s Meditation* by Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony, along with some of the piano music played by Michael Adcock, stand out as among some of the more compelling renditions. But the film, including brief tours of Barber’s childhood home in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and adult home in Mount Kisco, New York, is luminous throughout and dignifies all the performers and commentators. In sum, it is a lovely and enjoyable tribute to the composer.

Howard Pollack