Singing Death
Reflections on Music and Mortality

Edited by
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Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* (1938) is the most widely performed musical work for public mourning in the Western art music repertoire. Indeed, many listeners know the emotional import of this piece of music: in 2007, when BBC Radio asked its audience to nominate the ‘saddest piece of music ever written’, they received more than 400 nominations, and when they narrowed the field to the top five nominees, Barber’s *Adagio* received more votes than the other top four pieces combined (BBC 2012). But this is not what all listeners in the 1930s said about the work: reviewers of early Adagio renditions described the work as ‘dull’ (Pettis 473) and suffering from ‘thinness of content’ (Lieberson 66). During the twentieth century, however, performances of the work and our relationship to it changed so drastically that after a performance by the BBC Orchestra in a Proms concert led by American conductor Leonard Slatkin on September 15, 2001, four days after the 9/11 attacks, one reviewer reported that it left many audience members in tears (Mills n.p.), whereas another journalist described it as ‘agonizing’ with ‘unbearable tension’ (Lawson 11). The performance of the piece seemed to capture the spirit of a nation in mourning. How are we to understand and evaluate the meaning, politics and power of this performance?

In this chapter, I examine three recordings of the *Adagio* (Toscanini 1942; Stokowski 1958; Slatkin 2001), and explore how the work transformed over a period of seventy years to become, by 9/11, a nation-based, emotionally drenched, American anthem of mourning. Working with critical appropriations of Freud (Jean-Luc’s Nancy’s reflections on mourning and nationalism, Cathy Caruth’s reflections on trauma and repetition, and Slavoj Žižek’s reflections on objective versus subjective violence), I suggest that when the *Adagio* was performed on September 15, 2001, the sonic codes sounded intelligible and familiar to modern ears, yet listeners likely were unaware of how these grammars were shaped by societal influences. Specifically, I argue that this performance encouraged them to remember particular people in particular ways, resulting in a subtle, yet powerful form of political violence.
I have a very close connection with Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, and would like to begin by telling you two stories that both illuminate my relationship with the work and explain my original impetus for conducting this research. But first, I invite you to listen to the opening of the work.

**Example 1—*Adagio for Strings* (opening)**

In the fall of 1983, as part of a student brass group at Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, I performed a work by the Baroque composer Domenico Gabrielli. In the Italian Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo, visual artists created three-dimensional illusions, including painting clouds on ceilings to give the impression of a large, open sky. Baroque composers, in turn, attempted to imitate this effect by creating antiphonal works with two groups echoing each other while executing a codified practice of dynamics to create, through sound, a similar illusion of expansiveness. Because the conductor at Dalhousie felt that sound coming from opposite sides of the theatre, close to the ceiling, would create a more dramatic impression of extended space, we were raised up on opposing platforms and suspended some 80 feet above the stage. During the dress rehearsal, the platform on which I performed collapsed at one end, and five of us clung on for our lives. Eventually, a very shaken group of musicians were lowered down to safety.

When we finished, I walked, still shaken, into the darkened empty theater seats to hear a string group rehearse. I can remember the exact moment they began to play because the piece that met my ears was unlike anything I had heard before. I sat alone, transfixed. What was this? What are you? I was later told that the piece was Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*. I don’t remember the specifics of how the piece was played, or how my shock from the equipment malfunction shaped the ways I heard it that day. What I do remember is sitting in darkness, holding my breath. I met the *Adagio* on the first day I didn’t die.

A decade later, on February 26, 1993, I was in New York City conducting research on the Lower West Side. On my day off, I went with a friend around noon to the World Trade Center to buy tickets for a Broadway show. We were one floor below ground level when we felt the explosion. From this moment on, my memories of the event come in fragments: I fell forward and onto the ground; I remember the feeling of my friend grabbing the collar of my jacket and wrenching me to my feet; I remember the image of one woman’s body hurtling through panes of glass as the two of us ran into the darkness. Somehow, we made it to ground floor and followed the light to a door leading outside. I recall that there were many schoolchildren ahead of us, and that people were pushing us from behind to get to the revolving doors that stood between them and the safety of the street. The force of the people behind us was crushing us and the children; I pushed back against the pressure as best I could and eventually we made it through the doors. For weeks and months to come, I suffered from mild post-traumatic stress, a trauma that has never been fully resolved.

It is unsurprising, then, that after 9/11, I became obsessed with the television coverage of the unfolding events. I watched endless hours of news coverage and later, countless benefit concerts and tributes to those who died. I heard the *Adagio* repeatedly; in fact, the work was so ubiquitous in live performance and on television following 9/11 that it has been called an ‘unofficial anthem’ for the event (Deaville 52). Although I had built a relationship with the *Adagio* since our first encounter in 1983, it returned to my life again after 9/11 and I became once more riveted by it. What I didn’t immediately realize at the time was that I was suffering residual effects from the earlier 1993 bombing, the other day that I didn’t die. In hindsight, the events of 9/11 triggered my earlier trauma, and these events combined undoubtedly conflated with my *Adagio* preoccupation. Twice then, Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* met me in the moment I seemed to escape death.

Or, more accurately, the piece met me in the moment after I seemed to escape death, and this distinction holds significance. As Freud argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ‘...what we seek to understand are the effects produced on the organ of the mind by the breach in the shield against stimuli and by the problems that follow in its train’ [emphasis in the original] (2001: 31). In other words, traumatic experience is not just the moment of ‘impact’ (the fall, the bomb, the shock), but in the ensuing response and the relationship between those two moments. Cathy Caruth summarizes Freud’s position well:

The breach in the mind—the conscious awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a pure quantity of stimulus, Freud suggests, but by “fright,” the lack of preparedness to take in the stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind one moment too late. The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of the experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known. And it is this lack of direct experience that, paradoxically, becomes the basis of the repetition of the nightmare... [emphasis in the original].

Caruth argues that, in the traumatic moment, the individual breaks with his or her perception of time and cannot help but miss the direct experience of the event; this results in a replaying of the event, what Freud has called the ‘repetition compulsion’. Caruth’s argument relies on Freud’s analysis of the soldiers returning from the front whose dreams replayed the scenes of horror they had just escaped. Convinced of his claim that dreams were disguised wishes, he puzzled over what could be driving these terrifying dreams that in no way seemed to be disguising an unspoken or forbidden wish. His speculation was that, in fact, along with the life drive and the principle of pleasure, in each of us, there is also a drive towards death; this is not just a drive towards the missed encounter(s) with our own experience, but also a drive towards death itself. He speculated that this drive towards death coordinated with the pleasure principle insofar as, like the pleasure
principle, it was a drive towards zero tension and excitement: dust to dust, so to speak. As he said, 'we all want to die in our own way' (Freud 1922: 33). Freud's famous recounting of his grandson's mode of coping with the traumatic loss of his mother when she would leave their home helps to illustrate this 'drive to death' from a slightly different point of view. Freud recounted that the child was 'remarkably good' at taking his mother's leaving. But Freud observed the child playing with a wooden spool, sending it under the bed making a sound like 'fort' (or gone) and then pulling the spool back out, making a sound like 'da' (or here). In this case, Freud speculated that the drive to death (or death drive) was in some regards also a mastery or sovereignty drive. The child did repeat a scene of traumatic loss, but with the difference that in the game with the spool, he was agent of the 'disappeared object' and the one who had the magic power to make it reappear. In short, our tendency to endlessly repeat the same scenes—like a child's games that are repeated endlessly—we too repeat a scene of loss, looking for the 'missed encounter' (unsuccessfully) to master it.

Caruth further extends this argument to suggest that it may not be the actual confrontation with death that individuals repeat in flashbacks, but, paradoxically, the realization that they are still alive:

What is enigmatically suggested ... [in Freud's work] ... is that the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having survived, precisely, without knowing it. What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival. Repetition, in other words, is not simply the attempt to grasp that one has almost died, but more fundamentally and enigmatically, the very attempt to claim one's own survival [emphasis in the original] (64).

To put a finer point on my previous statement: the Adagio has been important for me in the moment immediately after my traumas when I began the realization that I had escaped an untimely demise. I return to it, looking for my own 'missed encounter'.

Whether the Adagio has helped people like me move through grief and/or process their own survival, it is a work many people have associated with emotional extremes. But why is this work so powerful, musically speaking, for this purpose? Arts journalist Johanna Keller provides some insights:

[The] Adagio for Strings, begins softly, with a single note, a B flat, played by the violins. Two beats later the lower strings enter, creating an uneasy, shifting suspension as a melody begins a stepwise motion, like a hesitant climbing of stairs. In around eight minutes the piece is over, harmonically unresolved, never coming to rest. (n.p.)

Keller's description of the work is accurate, but does not go far enough to explain the work's poignancy, especially when it is used to process trauma. I would like to provide two further reasons why I believe the Adagio grips us in times of mourning: repetition and timelessness, and again I borrow here from Freud. Freud viewed time as having either a continuous (healthy) or endless (disrupted) quality (1899, 1914); whereas continuous time clearly delineates past from present, endless time marks severely traumatized individuals who experience their past as ever-present, a past that continually impinges upon their ongoing daily life. They may, for instance, experience a flattened, blocked or drifting sense of time, or they may engage in compulsive repetition whereby, as noted previously, they repeat the trauma as a means of making sense of the event, or mastering it (Sutton 2014). The Adagio's sense of time resembles that as experienced by a traumatized, unhealed person: it is structured upon the repetition of the opening phrase, and while the work 'progresses' and moves beyond this original idea, it returns to it at the end of the work to close, as Keller suggests, harmonically unresolved. In other words, Barber's repetitious handling of the gut-wrenching musical statement mirrors the emotional 'stuckness' of an unresolved, traumatized individual. A second reason for the emotional effectiveness of this work may lie in its sense of 'timelessness': it lacks a clear beat, it shifts between different tempos (4/2, 5/2, 6/2), and these tempi are so slow that the pulse is imperceptible. The work, then, frustrates a clear sense of measured time; instead, it resembles a 'floating' state which, combined with its highly repetitive leanings, resembles the ways that those who are traumatized live inside the experience of linear, progressive time but rather circle repetitively around an experience of loss—a 'missed encounter'—in an endless occurrence of the same.

Despite these elusive and indefinite features—or indeed, perhaps because of them—this work has been used to mark many public losses, both real and fictional: it was played on the radio after Roosevelt's sudden death in 1945, during the radio report of J.F.K.'s assassination in 1963, after the Challenger explosion in 1986, the death of Princess Diana in 1987 and innumerable renditions worldwide after 9/11. Then there are the movie soundtracks: it was used in The Elephant Man (1980), El Norte (1983) and Lorenzo's Oil (1992), among many other films, but it is most commonly remembered for its ubiquitous use in Oliver Stone's war film Platoon (1986). The list of both fictional and non-fictional events with which it is associated is extensive.

Contrary to much thinking about the reparative dimensions of public mourning, in his book The Inoperative Community, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that any politics that begins from mourning is actually quite dangerous. By his reading, in the modern era and in the Western tradition, the idea of community has always involved a project that glorifies death to make it meaningful. Although death is precisely what most escapes meaning, and so brings us to the confrontation of the loss of God that marks the modern era, this work casts us as beings who long for a lost 'original' community. Influenced by Sigmund Freud's understanding of mourning as work (as well as Hegel's understanding of the ethical community), Nancy argues that the work of community is the work of mourning. Once the ceremonial rituals of death have been completed, the remains of the dead are sublated or 'raised up to the level of universality' and so returned to the
This mourning work, then, is not one work among others, but is rather work itself insofar as it ‘returns’ a community to its lost (imaginary) unified self-identity. In short, when mourning is undertaken in the name of a community (or a nation), this work actually separates insiders (those who members of the community) from outsiders, ‘us’ from ‘them.’ I shall return to this point momentarily.

We now understand Barber’s Adagio to accompany expressions of mourning for what social theorist Sharon Rosenberg called ‘bad deaths’ (234), particularly those who die before their time and/or whose demises are grim. In response to these moments, we crave the means to help us grieve, and to give meaning to that which, in the throes of trauma, seems utterly meaningless: death. If the Adagio effectively brings us to consider the limits of our existence, why not just leave it at that? Why not simply celebrate it as a work that accompanies—or even facilitates—mourning? Why would I even want to question this work’s political import? Can a piece of instrumental classical music have any political import? To delve into this series of interconnected questions, I look to Susan Sontag for direction.

In her books On Photography (1977) and Regarding the Pain of Others (2003), Susan Sontag argues against overly determined assumptions about the power of a photograph, and posits that a photograph cannot produce ethical feelings in a viewer, nor does it have the capacity to change a viewer’s mind about a complex event. Unlike prose which can compel a reader to alter their position on a contentious issue, photography can provide the viewer a partial impression, but not a full explanation of its content. According to Sontag, what photographs lack, what limits their ability to produce meaning, is a narrative. But what do we mean when we use the term narrative? Philosopher Jerrold Levinson argues that a narrative comprises three parts: first, it represents something outside of itself; second, it represents states of affairs or events; and, finally, it must represent temporality or causality between those states of affairs or events (429). Non-texted music (the music to which I will refer here) can suggest gestures and actions but falls short of fully representing them. The sound of Dukas’ symphonic poem The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, for instance, may present as highly narrative when it accompanies Mickey Mouse in Disney’s Fantasia, but the musical sounds themselves, without the title, before the film, could just as easily prompt a listener to think of a herd of elephants charging across a plain or a group of raucous children at a schoolyard. Music, like photography, then, is what Susan Sontag calls ‘evocative’: it can conjure images that already exist in our imaginations—or in the case of Fantasia, it can suture animated images to sound—but in isolation, music is not capable of pointing unambiguously to, or commenting upon, outside referents.

Music, then, is doubly dangerous: although it has the ability to communicate and to move people emotionally, it does not have the capacity to narrate. Instead of being taken seriously as a commentary on external events, it is too often idealized for its capacity to stir our emotions and therefore is positioned as being ‘not of this world’. This notion of music as somehow ‘naturalized’ suggests that it has little relation to larger social and political contexts. A few examples follow. In the nineteenth century, Beethoven stated that ‘Music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher wisdom of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend’. Later, Hans Christian Anderson posited that ‘Where words fail, music begins’. This reverence towards music continued into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: contemporary political critic Slavoj Žižek, for instance, remarked in his 2008 book Violence that ‘music comes in when words fail’ (5). Even musicologist Julie MacQuinn wrote that when Barber’s Adagio is used in contemporary film, it ‘no longer laments, but transcends’ (461). This notion of how music functions and produces its effects is tied to nineteenth-century Romantic emphasis on emotion and the sublime, and it continues to hold sway to this day. As a result, classical music traditionally has been disarticulated from politics as though it were unrelated to the historical events it accompanies. What I hope to do now is remove music from this transcendental discourse and explore it for its power to be politically persuasive. Although many people assume that music has the potential to speak back to violence, it is difficult for them to imagine a music that actually produces violence. Here, I would like to suggest that Barber’s Adagio for Strings—in all of its beauty and with its potential to help individuals grieve, mourn, and move through trauma—even this work could contribute to unforeseen, future violence.

To illustrate this point, I borrow from the writings of Slavoj Žižek. In his book Violence: Six Sideways Reflections, Žižek makes a distinction between what he terms ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ violence. Subjective violence, he explains, is visible (genocide, war, terrorism), the images we usually think of when we talk about violence. Subjective violence, however, is made possible through objective violence, which includes global forms of oppression and exploitation that appears to be the way things have to be. This is the violence that holds the “normal” peaceful state of things intact, the ‘neutral’ backdrop against which subjective violence explodes. In other words, if patriarchy is objective violence, wife beating is the subjective form. According to Žižek, there are then two modes of objective violence. The first is ‘systemic’, and this is the violence of capitalism: appropriating wealth and distributing it to the affluent few at the expense of the vast majority of the world’s people who live in poverty. In these terms, if I am in any moment made comfortable, such comfort was produced through someone else’s discomfort; someone else who labour too much and was paid too little so that I could have my desires fulfilled. This is a fraught relationship, one that is often normalized as a natural state of being, and rendered invisible.

The second type of objective violence is ‘symbolic’: violence (gender discrimination, racism, etc.) that is embedded in hegemonic forms of discourse. Through repetition, this form of symbolic language generates power and becomes naturalized while simultaneously limiting, stigmatizing and ‘othering’ subgroups. Language is one form of symbolic system (and the most familiar); music, too, can function symbolically. When certain musical gestures are consistently and repeatedly used in conjunction with particular events, people or images, the listener ascribes meaning to the sounds they hear based on their previous experiences (in modern cinema, for instance, we have come to associate low, sustained notes with ‘danger,’ melodic strings that fluctuate in tempo.
and dynamics with ‘dramatic’ and an ascending, upper-register harp glissando with the beginning of a dream sequence). These meanings are not ‘intrinsically’ to the actual sounds; instead, by repeating the same association every time that music is heard, that association is brought into subsequent hearings (as we might do with Mickey Mouse each time we hear The Sorcerer’s Apprentice). It is important to note, however, that this interpretative process is never foreclosed: symbolic associations can be broken and can change significantly over time. What I would like to do now is provide an instance of how music, and, in particular, Barber’s Adagio for Strings, can function symbolically. Specifically, by tracing the history of the work from its origins through a selection of twentieth-century performances to 9/11, I argue that the Adagio transformed symbolically from a benign composition to an anthem that was used in objective—and in particular, symbolic—violence. This work extends Žižek’s analysis of symbolic violence by bringing music to the fore and exploring how something as seemingly innocent as beautiful vibrations in the air can ultimately serve violent ends.

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The Adagio’s musical material was derived from Barber’s 1936 string quartet. The standard structure for a string quartet includes four distinct movements: fast, slow, mid-tempo dance and fast, and the Adagio is derived from the second (or ‘slow’) movement. There is an ambiguity with this tempo marking: unless more specific instructions are provided, ‘adagio’ simply means ‘slow tempo.’ Barber’s tempo instructions for the quartet are clarified, however, by an indication in the score that the movement should take between seven and eight minutes to perform. At the composer’s hand, then, the Adagio is provided clear temporal parameters.

Barber then rearranged the second movement of the string quartet for string orchestra in 1938, and when conductor Arturo Toscanini premiered the Adagio later that year, reviews of the work varied widely. Importantly, numerous reviewers described the work as withheld and it was characterized as having ‘thoughtful restraint’ (Howard 53). More recently, author Mortimer Frank described Toscanini’s interpretation as ‘without sentimentality, without excess, without making it sound overly sweet and cloying’ (Frank, Horowitz and Heyman n.p.).

I now ask you to play Example 2, Toscanini’s 1942 recording, and listen for what this reviewer calls ‘restraint’: the strings play with an even rhythm, and the notes move in a ‘measured’ way to the long sustained note at the end of the first phrase. The total length of this recording is seven minutes and nine seconds, a tempo within the range of Barber’s original intentions.

Example 2—Adagio for Strings, Toscanini recording (1942)

Although many reviewers heard Toscanini’s interpretation as withheld, other expressed considerably stronger responses at either end of the spectrum. There was much praise for this new work in 1938, and it clearly touched people on the eve of the Second World War. It was described, for instance, as ‘warm, lyrical music with a strong sense of direction’ and ‘deeply musical’ (Howard 53). Early criticisms, however, were also quite harsh: music critic Ashley Pettis described the piece as ‘dull’ and ‘utterly anachronistic’ in a letter to the New York Times (Pettis 472) and Godard Lieberson, writing for Modern Music, a significant music journal of the day, complained that the work was not only dated ([it is] contemporary only in the sense that the composer is still alive), but derivative (‘instead of melodic creativity and harmonic invention, Mr. Barber has substituted his wealth of experience in listening to the works of other composers’ (Lieberson 65–66). Importantly, although the reviews ranged from ‘thoughtful restraint,’ ‘warm’ to ‘anachronistic,’ none of the early critics called it ‘sad music’ (Howard 53).

When the Adagio was played at the announcement of Roosevelt’s death in 1945, however, the first close association with death was made across American airwaves and its symbolic meaning began to change. With this initial link in mind, I invite you to listen to Example 3, Leopold Stokowski’s 1958 recording of the Adagio. Listen now for a new intensity: the strings accelerate quickly but there is a dramatic ritard (a decrease of tempo) by the end of the phrase; on the last note, the strings emphasize a decrescendo, taking it to the next level of dramatic import. This recording is six minutes and twenty-six seconds long, much shorter than the seven minutes, twenty-nine seconds, of the original recording.

Example 3—Adagio for Strings, Stokowski recording (1958)

Stokowski’s 1958 recording was highly dramatic—it resembled excited misery but not over-sentimentalism. By this point, the Adagio’s association with death was conscious, but not yet fully crystallized: Martin Bernheimer, music critic for the Los Angeles Times, described the piece in 1970 as ‘so familiar as an all-purpose cultural theme song’ that it was difficult for him to take the work seriously (Bernheimer D10); elsewhere in reviews, it was heading in the direction of a threnody (a song of mourning), but this association was not yet exclusive (Howard 55).

Critical response to the work as a dramatic piece of concert music varied widely between 1938 and 1970: more consistent were criticisms after its first performance in 1938, and through the decades that followed, that the work was too conservative and, in particular, too ‘European’. American composer Aaron Copland may have summarized it best when he said:

I’m not sure I would be able to recognize it as American. I don’t think he had any conscious desire to write music that was immediately recognizable as American. That made him somewhat different...while [most other American composers] were very intent...on expressing an American quality in our concert music I don’t think he had any interest in that kind of thing.

(Dickinson 96)

Indeed, many of Barber’s contemporary American composers were interested in the music they heard in their environments, including jazz, blues and folk. Copland, for instance, gained public notoriety after his landmark ballet Appalachian Spring,
which incorporated the nineteenth-century American Shaker folk melody ‘Simple Gifts’. Similarly, composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein incorporated Latin American rhythms and melodies to accompany the Puerto Rican characters in his 1958 musical West Side Story. American composers were pursuing styles sensitive to their immediate environments and/or pointing to new twentieth-century musical directions, and many reviewers were critical of composers who relied too heavily upon outdated, traditional musical lexicons.

Many early listeners of the work, then, didn’t hear it as ‘American’, but instead, heard it within it a European musical vocabulary. Barber has often been cited as a composer whose roots run deep within the European tradition (Alsop n.p.; Pollock 175–176), and has been rightly deemed the ‘best known’ of the American romantics (Pollock 201). More specifically, it is well-documented that Barber was a huge admirer of nineteenth-century German and Austrian composers, including Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and Wagner (Pollock 175–176), and the Adagio itself frequently has been likened to German styles. As Joe Horovitz noted: ‘[It] sounds like Bach. Someone who didn’t like this piece would call it ersetzt Bach’ (Frank, Horowitz and Heyman n.p.). Understanding this sonic relationship to German music is vital because it helps explain why the Adagio has become so important within the contemporary Western music tradition. The German musical canon is the most frequently taught repertoire in public schools, colleges and university classrooms in the Western hemisphere, and is one of the most frequently performed classical traditions in the world, from Bach to Schubert and Brahms to Mozart (here I’m placing Austrian- and German-born composers together under the German-language category). Pieces of music we hear during Western high holidays illustrate this cultural bias (Mozart’s Requiem, Brahms’ Requiem, Beethoven’s Ode to Joy from Symphony No. 9, Bach’s Passions, to name but a few). German music is also often cited as the ‘best’ classical music humanity has to offer. A quick illustration: in a 2013 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation top-ten list by music blogger Robert Rowat entitled ‘Ten Pieces of Classical Music Everyone Should Know,’ five of the ten composers were German, with other composers (Bach, Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms) securing the top four positions (Rowat n.p.). Similar lists abound.

I would argue further that the Adagio’s musical origins can be more specifically traced back to late nineteenth-century German musical vocabularies. Mapping it back to this particular moment is useful for thinking through how the work signifies nationally. By means of explanation, briefly compare the Adagio with the beginning of Richard Wagner’s 1859 opera Tristan and Isolde. Listen to this work’s highly dramatic musical opening: a small musical kernel grows and recedes, crescendos and decrescendos; it is then followed by a prolonged silence, bearing stylistic resemblance to the opening of the Adagio.

Example 4—Tristan and Isolde (1859) (opening)

I reference Wagner’s opera not only because of its musical similarity to the Adagio, but because of what it can teach us about late nineteenth-century European nationalism and how, in turn, this heightened moment of nationalist sentiment continues to inflect the Adagio today. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Europe saw the unification of lands: Italy, for instance, was an organization of provinces and city-states until it was unified under one constitution in 1870; the German empire was unified the following year. Each nationalist movement was reflected in the nurturing of local languages, customs, stories, dances and music—including folk music—in the service of ‘the nation’. Wagner’s late Romantic Germanic style, then, is often used to signify what is specifically, heroically and symbolically, national German (hence, Hitler promoted Wagner’s compositions during the Nazi era). Alternatively, however, it also represents what is exceptional about all of humanity. As musicologist Peter Tregear has argued, German classical music has been viewed as representing at the same time ‘both an exemplary cultural expression of the German people and a universal style against which all other Western art-music traditions are to be defined and judged’ (Tregear 158). In other words, these works transcend the specificity of their own historical origin, while at the same time bringing credit upon the historical moment that brings them forth. Even though German music—like all music—is stylistically linked to its historical and cultural moment, it is often said that German music speaks ‘without accent’ as it transmits otherworldly qualities such as transcendence and sublimity (158).

Tregear has also convincingly argued (159) that there is a resemblance between the canonical German classical music’s claim to universal validity and aspects of contemporary American postnationalism. Historically, American nationalism has always been linked with such concepts as ‘hope’, ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’, and this has been especially true post-9/11. We don’t have to go far into the George W. Bush video vault to witness this type of language:

Example 5—George W. Bush video

Clearly, as evidenced in this example, the usual markers of nation—a particular people, a particular language or religion or history—are not what define Americanism. Instead, the nation is defined as always having shared transcendent ideals. The same mechanism works for American post-national music: like the earlier Germanic tradition, this music also speaks ‘without accent’, and for this reason the Adagio subsequently has become associated with important public occasions (Tregear 160). What was originally a criticism of the work—namely, that it was stylistically too German (a late nineteenth-century, more conservative musical vocabulary) and not ‘American’ enough (it didn’t incorporate new American genres or point us to new paths in avant-garde experimentalism)—ultimately turns out to be an asset and has given the piece longevity. As with the German repertoire, which is both historically specific and universal, the Adagio, post-9/11, speaks both American and universal discourses. Listen to the claim for its universal transcendence: author Thomas Lawson writes in his 2010 monograph on the work that ‘Today, Barber’s Adagio has come to embody the enormity of sorrow—yours, mine, and ours, individual and collective’ (14). Similarly, after 9/11, director of BBC Proms Nicholas Kenyon stated that the Adagio would be
performed in London for affirmation of ‘our shared humanity’ ('Proms' 2001). Similar statements about the work’s ‘universalism’ abound, especially after 9/11. Like the German canon to which I referred previously, which represents both a universal ideal as well as an extraordinary German cultural expression, there are also many instances in which the Adagio speaks particularly for Americans. Lawson, again: ‘[It] is the Pieta of music. It captures the sorrow and pity of tragic death; listening to it, we are Mother Mary come alive—holding the lifeless Christ on our laps, one arm bracing the slumped head, the other offering him to the ages’ (7). ‘Despite its universality’, he continues, ‘the Adagio has developed an American pedigree. What’s more, its Americanness is still evolving’ (15). Alex Ross, music critic for The New Yorker, meanwhile, observes that whenever the American dream suffers a catastrophic setback, Barber’s Adagio for Strings plays on the radio (Ross 286). Similarly, American composer and teacher Charles Turner said in a BBC radio broadcast that he has been America’s ‘national funeral music’ (Frank, Horowitz and Heyman n.p.). So, although the piece is cited for its universality, there are also many references to its status as a canonized hegemonic American work. Today, the Adagio holds American status precisely because America is itself ‘post-national’.

With this in mind, let us return to the Adagio’s performance history and listen to the opening once again as it was performed on September 15, 2001, by the BBC Orchestra. This performance, led by American conductor Leonard Slatkin, was part of the ‘Last Night of the BBC Proms 2001’. Listen to how much more ‘dramatic’ the work is under Slatkin’s direction: compared to the previous two versions, it’s much slower—it takes a full ten minutes and twenty seconds to complete, far beyond Barber’s intentions—and listen for a subtle yet powerful ritard before the final sustained note as well as heightened changes in dynamics. This excerpt includes the opening and the climax in the second half of the work.

Example 6—Slatkin’s Adagio (2001)

This work is much more dramatic than either of the previous renditions, and Slatkin’s gut-wrenching conducting style further emphasizes the work’s intensity. But what are the effects of such drama so close to 9/11? Did it speak to our shared humanity in this particular cultural moment? Or was it a threnody for the American people?

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In her article ‘Meditations on Turning Towards Violently Dead’, Sharon Rosenberg warns us to be cautious around memorializing frames that rely upon a shared identity. Within these frames, she argues, dichotomies tend to dominate: us versus them, victim versus perpetrator, innocence versus evil and so on. This forecloses the possibility for what she calls ‘staying in relation, as a grappling with responsibility, as a form of radical hope for what democracy can mean’ (Rosenberg 236). Consider these words vis-à-vis this particular performance: the now well-established symbolism of the Adagio (an anthem of mourning) is combined with dramatic musical sounds to which we are pre-conditioned to respond with pathos (a slow tempo, dramatic changes in tempo and dynamics). When the Adagio is performed in this way, it works to pull Westerners in to identify with American victims in a heightened emotional way. Does it also then foreclose the possibility of us staying in relation as we grapple with our responsibility? In other words, can this musical performance prevent us from experiencing the emotional distance necessary to see how we may be culpable for creating the oppressive objective conditions from which this kind of subjective violence results?

This dramatic performance of the Adagio does not communicate a shared universalism, but is used to commit a form of symbolic violence: it is performed in such a way that it separates us from them, grievable from non-grievable, victim from perpetrator, and in doing so, helps forges a dangerous nation-based community who militarily will soon seek revenge. In other words, the listeners’ previously made symbolic associations between the Adagio and mourning and deeply held grief, disguises the performance’s political impact, allowing it to move listeners in ways they might not even be aware. On this view offered by Jean-Luc Nancy, the community’s work of mourning returns it to its self-identity insofar as it ‘inters’ or assimilates what intrudes, and casts the nation as a lost glory whose past can and must be recaptured (Kellogg 339).

Is there a way music can be programmed and performed to help us resist the temptation to forge stronger national identities that will inevitably lead to further violent conflict? Can a performance help us hold a difficult, precarious and painful position of mourning that might also frustrate a nation-based collective desire to seek political revenge? Can we imagine an Adagio that both allows for intimacy with the grieving listener and allows them enough separation to grapple with the objective violence that led to that event?

What will the Adagio sound like after the next world-changing event? That event is coming. When it happens, I invite you to listen to the Adagio performances that undoubtedly will follow, and, as the sounds and images resonate across your media scape, question with whom, and for whom, you are summoned to grieve.

Notes

1 The examples described in this chapter are available at http://ggo.gl/nI3SmJ.
2 For a more complete list of films that use Barber’s Adagio, see Luke Howard, ‘The Popular Reception of Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings’, American Music (Spring 2007): 50–80.
3 For more on the narrative potential of music, as well music’s violent potential, see Susan Fast and Kip Pegley, ‘Introduction’ to Music, Politics and Violence (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2012). I am indebted to Susan Fast for allowing me to paraphrase this research here.
6 I would like to thank Natasha Pinterics, whose research assistance and careful editorial eye was invaluable in the latter stages of finishing this article. I am especially indebted to Catherine Kellogg for many wonderful conversations about Barber and mourning, and for so generously sharing her intellectual insights that greatly improved the work.
Works cited


