

Charles Munch Born: September 26, 1891 - Strasbourg, Alsace, France

Died: November 6, 1968 - Richmond, Virginia, USA

The eminent Alsatian-born French conductor, Charles Munch (originally, Münch), was the son of the Alsatian organist and choral conductor Ernst Münch (1859-1928). His elder brother was the choir-master and professor of music, Fritz Münch. Charles studied violin at the Strasbourg Conservatory and with Lucien Capet in Paris. At the outbreak of World War I (1914), he enlisted in the German army; made a sergeant of artillery, he was gassed at Peronne and wounded at Verdun; after the end of the war (1918) and his return to Alsace-Lorraine (1919), he became a naturalised French citizen.



Having received further violin training from Flesch in Berlin, Charles Munch pursued a career as a soloist; was also professor of violin at the Leipzig Conservatory and concert-master of the Gewandhaus Orchestra there. In November 1932, he made his professional conducting debut in Paris with the Straram Orchestra. He studied conducting with Szendrei in Paris from 1933 to 1940. He quickly rose to prominence; was conductor of Paris's Orchestra de la Société Philharmonique from 1935 to 1938, and in 1936 became a professor at the École Normale de Musique. In 1938 he became music director of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris, remaining in that post during the years of the German occupation during World War II; refusing to collaborate with the Nazis, he gave his support to the Resistance, being awarded the Légion d'honneur in 1945.

Charles Munch made his USA debut as a guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in December 1946; a trans-continental tour of the USA with the French National Radio Orchestra followed in 1948. In 1949 he was appointed music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which he and Monteux took on its first European tour in 1952; they took it again to Europe in 1956, also touring in the Soviet Union, making it the first USA orchestra to do so. After retiring from his Boston post in 1962, he made appearances as a guest conductor; also helped to launch the Orchestre de Paris in 1967.

Charles Munch acquired an outstanding reputation as an interpreter of the French repertoire, his performances being marked by spontaneity, colour, and elegance. French music of the 20th century also occupied a prominent place on his programs; he brought out new works by Rousset, Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and others. He wrote *Je suis chef d'orchestre* (1954).

Strings Of The Boston Symphony Orchestra

Charles Munch conducting

Barber • Elgar • Tchaikovsky



Adagio for Strings, orchestra arrangement of the second movement of American composer Samuel Barber's String Quartet (1936). It premiered on November 5, 1938. It has long been associated in the United States with national periods of mourning, having been performed at the funerals of U.S. presidents (Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy) and in the days following the September 11 attacks in 2001. It was also part of the film score for Oliver Stone's Academy Award-winning film *Platoon* (1986).

The Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini first brought the Adagio for Strings to wide public attention. Impressed by some of Barber's works that he had heard in performance in Europe, he asked Barber for music that his NBC Symphony might perform. Barber provided the scores for two short works: his *Essay for Orchestra* (to be the first of three such "essays") and the Adagio for Strings. Toscanini premiered both works with the NBC Symphony in a broadcast concert and recorded the Adagio soon after.

The work is built largely upon an ascending three-note motif and stretches out the repetition of that motif over broadly spacious phrases with dynamics that—like the shape of the melodic phrase itself—rise and fall. All the string parts, including the basses (which would not have appeared in the original string-quartet version), take turns with the deeply melancholy melody. As the music proceeds, phrases become longer and move higher in range, lending a sense of increased intensity. A brief moment of silence appears before the last restatements of the theme. In 1967 Barber crafted a new version of the Adagio: setting to it the text of the ancient prayer *Agnus Dei* and intending it for chorus, with or without keyboard accompaniment. The original String Quartet, Op. 11, from which the Adagio was derived, premiered in Rome on December 14, 1936. Thus, its melodies feature at opposite ends of Barber's career.

The idea for the Introduction and Allegro was first put to Elgar by August Jaeger – Nimrod of the *Enigma Variations* – who suggested that he write a piece for the recently founded London Symphony Orchestra. Jaeger's proposal was for "a brilliant, quick scherzo", an apt description for this exhilarating work.

Elgar's normal method of composition included the use of themes which he had jotted down in his sketchbooks as they occurred to him, often years earlier, waiting for the right work in which to use them. The Introduction and Allegro contains one such theme in particular, what Elgar himself referred to as the 'Welsh tune'. It had come to him in August 1901 when the Elgars had been on holiday in Cardiganshire, West Wales, supposedly inspired by the distant singing of Welsh folk tunes. Elgar believed it to capture a Welsh musical idiom and had planned to use it in a projected Welsh Overture. That work never materialised, however, so Elgar used the theme in this work

instead.

Despite a number of early champions, the work took many years to gain the popularity and esteem it has today. After an initial handful of performances which were generally coolly received, the work remained largely ignored for the next thirty years or so. Perhaps the complexity of the work deterred performers, for it was only with the general improvement in the standard of orchestral string sections since the Second World War that the work gained a foothold in the concert repertoire. Today, its position is secure.

Tchaikovsky's *Serenade* was written in 1880 during one of the happier periods of his life. He wrote it whilst composing the 1812 Overture which he had promised everyone would be 'noisy'. Of the serenade he wrote "I am passionately in love with this work" The *Serenade* was first performed in Moscow at the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in 1882.

This passion is immediately felt in the grand opening of the *Serenade* with its heraldic passages for celli and bassi and later violins. As the movement continues into *Allegro moderato* the impetus of swinging melodies is breathtaking. The interplay of all the string sections creates woodwind like effects. The movement closes with repeat of the solemn introduction before a flamboyant and bright arpeggio closes the movement.

The *Waltz* with its superb and vibrant melody seems to capture the electric atmosphere of a ball. As the melody develops one feels the masculine quality of the second violins and celli as they take up the *Waltz* – gentlemen courting the girls who surround the ballroom and whose teasing laughter is heard in the high accompanying figures of the first violins. An amusing interchange between instruments brings the *Waltz* with its final pizzicati to an elegant close.

The *Elégie*: The opening *largetto* is a superb example of that feeling of longing which turns to resignation so often found in Russian music. The beautiful duets in the *poco piu animato* section, which rise and die away accompanied by triplets, are suddenly interrupted by a romantic outburst by violas. Their melody is followed by the superb 'ballet' episode with violin octaves.

After the cellos impassioned passage and *stringendo* with the first violins, a dramatic silence occurs. The expressive *largetto* returns. Continued passion over a strange throbbing heartbeat from the double basses draws the movement to a close on a *flageolet* D.

The *Finale* (*Tema Russo*) :The *Andante*, which also opens on D (creating a feeling of continuity) introduces the first of two Russian folksongs. Pictures are painted in the bass-line seeming to recall dark Russian forests. Wonderful moments fill the *Allegro con spirito* with organ like harmonies in the violas, spirited pizzicati and inventive bass-lines. The *Allegro* ends with a whirlwind passage, which suddenly braces itself for the final glorious *Molto meno mosso*.

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Barber

1. Adagio for Strings

Elgar

2. Introduction And Allegro For Strings Op. 47

Tchaikovsky Serenade For Strings Op.48

3. Pezza In Forma Di Sonatina

4. Walzer

5. Elegie

6. Finale - Tema Russo

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