

AGENCY AND THE *ADAGIO*:

MIMETIC ENGAGEMENT IN BARBER'S OP. 11 QUARTET*

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Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1936) is undoubtedly the best-known elegiac work of the twentieth century. It was an immediate hit with its first performance by Toscanini in 1938 and its fame has grown ever since. We know it from movies, television, state funerals, and highly publicized memorial services.¹ It is, quite simply, Barber's most enduring music.² It goes without saying, then, that the *Adagio* works as a stand-alone piece; nobody could deny that it presents a complete, coherent artistic statement. And yet it was originally composed as the second movement of the String Quartet, op. 11, with several meaningful connections to the outer movements. Indeed, as I will demonstrate below, the quartet's *Adagio* can be interpreted as a crucial component within a larger, multi-movement tragic narrative.³

* I'd like to thank Seth Monahan for offering invaluable advice and insights throughout the process of writing this article.

¹ For specific examples, see the "Legacy" section of the "Adagio for Strings" entry of Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adagio_for_Strings>.

² Barber himself immediately recognized the quality of the *Adagio*. On 19 September 1936, he wrote a letter to Orlando Cole announcing: "I have just finished the slow movement of my quartet today—it is a knockout!" (quoted in Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and his Music* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992], 153). Nevertheless, Barber was often bothered by the special attention it eventually received. In 1949, when an interviewer mentioned that the *Adagio for Strings* was the first composition by Barber that he had ever heard, Barber responded, "I wish you'd hear some new ones. Everybody always plays that!" (quoted in Peter Dickinson [ed.], *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute* [Rochester: Univ. of Rochester Press, 2010], 35).

³ Despite the *Adagio*'s fame, it has received scant analytical attention and has never been properly considered within its original context. Thomas Larson provides an overview of the music, but eschews detailed analytical interpretation (see Larson, *The Saddest Music Ever Written: The Story of Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings* [New York: Pegasus Books, 2010]).

For those familiar with the outer movements of Op. 11, this may come as a surprise. The second-movement Adagio features a deliberately archaic sound, with Renaissance-like polyphony and simple tertian harmonies.⁴ The outer allegro movements, on the other hand, are far more modern, with heavy emphasis on augmented triads, hexatonic collections, and occasional patches of atonality. And these differences are reinforced by the imbalance in popularity. Listening to the entire quartet is like seeing a famous Rembrandt flanked by two unknown cubists: they seem to have nothing to do with one another.

But Barber gives us at least one obvious reason to look closer. The opening movement is a sonata form in B minor. The second-movement Adagio sinks down a semitone to the key of B \flat minor (with some modal inflections). The third movement is a drastically altered reprise of the first, but it draws together the two prior keys: it begins with the Adagio's B \flat minor, and ends with the first movement's B minor. This raises several immediate questions: Why does the third movement begin with a continuation of the Adagio's tonality? Why does it reprise the opening sonata in such a distorted fashion?⁵ Is the movement best heard as a *response* to the Adagio?

These questions become more pressing when we consider that Barber originally wrote a third-movement finale in the key of B major, a rondo with no obvious connections to the prior movements.⁶ According to Orlando Cole, a founding member of the Curtis Quartet, he discarded it and replaced it with the sonata reprise only after people complained that the sprightly major-

⁴ Throughout the article "Adagio" (unitalicized) will refer to the second movement of Op. 11. The italicized "Adagio" will refer to the later arrangement for string orchestra.

⁵ As we will see, the second theme is cut out entirely and the recapitulation is completely "written over" with new material. (For a definition of "writing over," see James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006], 212–215.)

⁶ Heyman incorrectly identifies the key as F \sharp major (*Samuel Barber*, 158). The parts are available at the Curtis Institute Music Library.

mode music didn't work after the somber Adagio.⁷ What's interesting, then, is not just that Barber returned to a dark minor key, but that he explicitly tied everything together by reversing the prior tonal trajectory: the first and second movements shift from B to B^b, the third movement rises from B^b to B.

Nevertheless, these large-scale tonal paths are difficult for most listeners to hear, and there are no explicit thematic connections between the outer movements and the Adagio. There are, however, strong *gestural* connections. Put simply, the quartet continually creates the impression of a singular musical persona struggling—and ultimately failing—to rise up to a stable major mode. It is the essential story of Op. 11. Indeed, such gestures are so obvious in the Adagio that they almost go without saying; many readers will reflexively associate the Adagio with the scene from Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) in which Sergeant Elias famously mimics the music's struggling ascent by raising his arms to the heavens just before dying. But an emphasis on embodiment opens up far more subtle connections as well, which can be uncovered with careful thought about agency, gesture, and mimetic engagement. The following section reviews some of the relevant literature on these topics; the final section applies those ideas to a narrative interpretation of the Op. 11 quartet.

AGENCY, MIMETIC ENGAGEMENT, AND MEANING

The term “mimetic engagement” comes from the recent work of Arnie Cox, who argues that listeners tend to respond to music by implicitly asking two basic questions: “What is it like to do that?” and “What is it like to be that?”⁸ When considering the famous opening melody of

⁷ Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 172.

⁸ Arnie Cox, “Embodying Music: Principles of the Mimetic Hypothesis,” *Music Theory Online* 17/2 (2011), [8].

FIGURE 1. Barber's Op. 11, Adagio: mm. 1–5

The musical score for measures 1–5 of Barber's Op. 11, Adagio, is presented for four instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. Violin I plays a melodic line starting on a whole note in measure 1, marked *pp* and *espr. cantando*. Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello provide harmonic support with sustained notes and chords, marked *pp* and *p*.

the Adagio—shown in Figure 1—we might imagine playing the music ourselves on the violin: one hand slowly guiding the bow along the strings, the other hand's fingers inching up the neck. But since most of us aren't violinists, we might instead sing the melody aloud or in our heads, fully aware, perhaps, of the difficulties involved—the challenge of sustaining all of those notes in a single breath. In short, we answer the question “What is it like to do that?” by engaging in some type of performative imitation, even if only in our minds.

But as Cox points out, we could also engage this music in a more abstract way, by imagining what it's like to *be* that melody. We often do this reflexively by correlating musical movement with movement in some other domain (e.g., walking, leaping, swaying, or slumping). The very fact that most musicians would refer to the opening Adagio melody in terms of “step-wise ascent” reflects the degree to which we typically imagine music in terms of physical movement through a virtual space (e.g., climbing steps). The “steps” are not real, of course, and the pitches are not literally “higher” or “lower.” But the fact that we often experience the music as such is very real indeed.⁹ It thus makes perfect sense to imagine what it might be like to *be*

⁹ Mark Johnson, “Embodied Musical Meaning,” *Theory and Practice* 22–23 (1997), 99.

this melody. And these imaginings will be affected by countless factors, including strictly musical issues (the slow tempo, the minor mode, the elegiac topics and tropes) and extra-musical influences (the scene from *Platoon*, for instance).

As Cox points out, this mode of listening isn't simply a concern for music cognition: it filters into our analytical discourse in the form of agency attribution.¹⁰ If I say that the Adagio melody struggles to ascend, I'm treating the melody as an independent sentient agent—something that wants to achieve a particular goal. But the simple phrase “struggles to ascend” implies something far more complicated, which might be expanded as follows: “When I imagine what it's like to be the Adagio melody, I imagine a painful, difficult struggle to rise upward. But since I know *I'm* not ascending when I'm listening to the piece, I imagine the melody itself as the agent of the action, and I empathize with its plight.” Applied more generally, this suggests that we have a sympathetic, subjective response to music, which we can experience (when listening) from the standpoint of a neutral, objective observer. And as analysts, we step back and recount what “the music” does, even if, in a very important sense, the music is us.¹¹

This process of agency attribution immediately opens up a number of other issues concerning the nature of musical agents and their environments. Since the process is highly subjective—based on our personal empathic reactions to music—there are no commonly recognized strategies for how to define agency and musical motion. There are, however, some simple dichotomies that typically guide us through. The most important of these is the distinction between active and passive motion. As Steve Larson points out, we tend to experience tonal melodic motion as being affected by various musical forces (he emphasizes three: gravity,

¹⁰ Cox, “Embodying Music,” 61.

¹¹ This paragraph echoes Arnie Cox, “Hearing, Feeling, Grasping Gestures,” in *Music and Gesture*, ed. Anthony Gritten and Elaine King (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 53.

magnetism, and inertia).¹² For Larson, melodic lines generally move passively in response to these neutral, Newtonian forces. Other scholars, such as Edward T. Cone, Fred E. Maus, and Robert Hatten, have focused more on *active* motion, with the music presenting one or more agents or personae that move through a musical space with specific goals, desires, and intentions.¹³ Hatten in particular makes a strong case for combining these approaches. He argues that we might interpret certain musical gestures in terms of freely energetic, agential motion that is nevertheless affected by various “virtual environmental forces.”¹⁴ A large upward leap, for instance, might be heard in terms of the willful effort of a musical agent to resist gravity in order to reach a higher plane. If the subsequent music slips downward, we might hear it in terms of passive descent, with the agent yielding to forces such as gravity and momentum.¹⁵

This perspective applies quite naturally to the Adagio theme in Figure 1. Several factors encourage us to hear the melody as an active agent moving with labored, physical effort. Many of these are obvious—the slow tempo, the restricted range, the ascending steps that continually fall backward, requiring repetitive upward motion—but some are more subtle. Consider Figure 2a, which highlights some of the metrical and harmonic dissonance between the melody and the accompanying chords. The outer-voice framework involves simple stepwise parallel tenths, but the melody is misaligned with the harmony, creating conflicting accent patterns and occasional intervallic dissonance (10–11–10–11). The metric dissonance in particular suggests that the

¹² Steve Larson, *Musical Forces: Motion, Metaphor, and Meaning in Music* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2012).

¹³ See Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974); Fred Everett Maus, “Music as Drama,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988): 56–73; Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1994); and Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 103.

¹⁵ I explore the differences between active and passive interpretation more fully in my article, “Musical Forces and Interpretation: Some Thoughts on a Measure in Mahler,” *Music Theory Online* (forthcoming).

FIGURE 2.

(a) Adagio, mm. 1–5: metrical and contrapuntal dissonance between melody and bass

(b) Metrically aligned foil with $\frac{3}{2}$ time signature

melody attempts to move *faster* than the accompaniment, perhaps straining forward, desperately stumbling toward its goal.¹⁶ This last point is especially reinforced if we compare Barber's melody with Figure 2b, which recomposes the theme with melody and bass fully aligned in $\frac{3}{2}$ meter. Compared to this recomposed version, the actual music suggests a melodic line that pushes ahead of the supporting harmonies, exacerbating the melody's obvious upward struggle.¹⁷ The overall effect is that of an agonizing effort—an unsteady climb where the melodic agent traverses *seventeen notes* in a clear upward arc and yet only rises a single step overall ($B\flat$ to C) and only a fourth at its highest peak ($E\flat$).

Many listeners undoubtedly sense this physical strain intuitively, experiencing the melody both anthropomorphically and empathically. That perspective likely contributes to the common reception of the *Adagio* as “sad music.” But we should be careful not to be too simplistic about musical affect. According to Thomas Larson, “the *Adagio*'s most enduring legacy is the

¹⁶ The discussion of metric dissonance in this passage is indebted to Harald Krebs, *Fantasy Pieces: Metrical Dissonance in the Music of Robert Schumann* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Although the melody moves ahead of the accompaniment, they both move more *slowly* than the recomposed version. This likely accentuates the sense that the entire texture is weakened or burdened in some way.

question it continually poses: What is its sorrow about?”¹⁸ And we might even question whether the piece is really about “sorrow” to begin with. The journal *American Music* recently published two articles that treat this issue, particularly with regard to the *Adagio*’s use in film.¹⁹ Both authors—Luke Howard and Julie McQuinn—emphasize the extraordinary degree to which the *Adagio* has been affected by its dissemination in popular culture. Howard, in particular, argues that the popular notion of the *Adagio* as “sad music” may have little to do with the way Barber conceived the work, or with the way the early audiences responded. For example, neither Barber nor his early critics described the work in elegiac terms (although, to be fair, there doesn’t appear to be much evidence that they would have considered such interpretations strange or inappropriate either). Howard goes so far as to say that

Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* has been so transformed, commoditized, mass-produced, and electronically mediated that the phenomenon of the *Adagio*’s recent popularity may seem to have very little to do with the original work itself. In one sense, the slow movement from a string quartet that Barber composed in 1936 doesn’t exist anymore and cannot be retrieved.²⁰

At times, Larson seems to agree: “Once [Barber] sent his piece out on its maiden voyage, the media’s evolution and the dialogue between music and listener would determine the piece’s meaning as much as the composition itself.”²¹ More often, however, he writes about the *Adagio* as if its elegiac qualities are absolute: “Barber’s *Adagio* is the pietà of music. It captures the sorrow and pity of tragic death. . . . No sadder music has ever been written.”²²

¹⁸ T. Larson, *The Saddest Music Ever Written*, 14.

¹⁹ See Luke Howard, “The Popular Reception of Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*,” *American Music* 25/1 (2007): 50–80; and Julie McQuinn, “Listening Again to Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* as Film Music,” *American Music* 27/4 (2009): 461–499.

²⁰ Howard, “The Popular Reception,” 75.

²¹ T. Larson, *The Saddest Music Ever Written*, 24.

²² T. Larson, *The Saddest Music Ever Written*, 7.

Ultimately, these different responses simply reinforce the complexity of musical affect in general. Research in music cognition has identified several different mechanisms that contribute to emotional response, including—among other things—mimetic engagement, personal and cultural associations, and acoustical impact.²³ Howard and McQuinn focus largely on the *Adagio*'s cultural associations and the way they have affected its reception. Larson focuses much of his writing on personal associations (although he addresses many other sources of affect as well). The focus of this paper is mimetic engagement, especially as a catalyst for narrative analysis. By imagining the music as a sentient persona that struggles toward certain contextually defined goals, we illuminate several recurring patterns across the quartet. The following interpretation, then, is comprehensive but not exhaustive, focusing on two interrelated topics, both of which depend upon the presence of a striving, goal-directed “agent”: (1) the importance of leading tone resolution and the up/down binary, and (2) the modal drama of major vs. minor, especially as it relates to the sonata tradition.²⁴

Before embarking on this narrative, however, I must offer a brief qualification: my interpretation consistently depicts the music of Op. 11 as a *singular* musical agent operating amongst (and against) virtual environmental forces, especially gravity. Needless to say, this is not the only way to engage this music in terms of agency. Most obviously, one could imagine many other readings that identify *multiple* agents throughout the piece. This would be the case, for instance, if we identified different motives or themes as independent agents, or if we

²³ Patrik N. Juslin, et al., identify seven “underlying mechanisms”: brain stem response, evaluative conditioning, emotional contagion (similar to Cox’s mimetic engagement), visual imagery, episodic memory, music expectancy, and cognitive appraisal (see Patrik N. Juslin, Simon Liljeström, Daniel Västfjäll, and Lars-Olov Lundqvist, “How Does Music Evoke Emotions? Exploring the Underlying Mechanisms,” in *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, ed. Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Sloboda [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010], 615–616).

²⁴ The analysis is comprehensive in the sense that it binds all three movements into a single, coherent narrative arc. But it avoids a measure-by-measure account of the complete quartet, which, even if desired, would be impossible to cover in the space of a single article. Instead, it focuses on a small collection of significant moments that

presented the different instruments as individual personae. This latter possibility is especially common: chamber music has a long history of reception as a dialogue between performers.²⁵ My intention is not to discount such possibilities, but simply to offer a reading that I find particularly compelling, one in which the piece is construed as a single tragic persona.²⁶

This brings us, then, to the crux of the Op. 11 narrative. In my interpretation, the primary goal of the quartet is to achieve a stable, parallel major key (B major). It is the goal of the opening sonata movement, the goal of the Adagio's climax, and the explicit goal of the third-movement reprise. Moreover, this rather abstract tonal goal—which is difficult for listeners to follow without absolute pitch—is continually reflected in repeated surface gestures throughout the piece, where the music strives upward in an attempt to shift from minor to major. The remainder of this paper supports this narrative by focusing on the critical interplay of leading tone resolution and sonata design, showing how an appreciation of both can accentuate our mimetic engagement with the music.

PART ONE: FAILED LEADING TONES AND THE TRAGEDY OF OP. 11

Theorists for centuries have emphasized the goal-directed tendencies of tonal music—the degree to which scale degrees create impressions of direction and intention.²⁷ The leading tone is

highlight the overall trajectory of the piece.

²⁵ Edward Klorman summarizes various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century viewpoints on the subject by figures such as Koch, Sulzer, Reicha, and Momigny, and he ultimately presents his own theory of “multiple agency.” See Klorman, *Multiple Agency in Mozart's Chamber Music* (Ph.D. dissertation, City Univ. of New York, in progress).

²⁶ In some ways, the different viewpoints can easily be reconciled. Seth Monahan shows how agency attribution typically works according to an implicit hierarchy that involves, from top to bottom, the analyst, the fictional composer (a “mouthpiece” for the analyst), the “work persona,” and the work’s “individuated elements.” We typically shift between these levels in our analytical discourse without causing confusion precisely because they are all bound together in a logical hierarchy. Discourse on one level typically implicates the others. (See Monahan, “Action and Agency Revisited,” paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Music Theory, Minneapolis, 28 October 2011. I would like to thank the author for sharing this paper with me.)

²⁷ See Lee Rothfarb, “Energetics,” in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002): 927–955.

especially important in this regard. Although it is sometimes interpreted passively as a non-sentient entity that is “pulled up” to the tonic (e.g., Steve Larson’s concept of magnetism), it is also frequently cast in an active role, as a mark of willful agency: a sentient being that “strives” for a higher, stable platform. This active, agential view opens up important avenues with regard to narrative. It not only creates conflict—an agent operating against some kind of oppositional force (such as gravity)—but also establishes clear narrative outcomes: the possibility for success or failure.²⁸

In the Op. 11 quartet, leading tones are most notable for their inability to create tonal closure. Success is rare in this regard, and failure is pervasive. All three movements, for instance, show palpable difficulty establishing stable, tonic harmonies. Such instability may be unsurprising for 1936, but what makes the lack of tonal closure particularly notable in Op. 11 is the degree to which the failed resolutions are *staged*: they continually occur as strained, exaggerated gestures, often in the extreme upper register.

This is clear right from the beginning of the opening movement. Figure 3 shows the first theme. It begins with agitated, minor-mode chromaticism, immediately engaging the up/down binary with a familiar *Sturm und Drang* gesture: a modernized version of the Mannheim Rocket that plants chromatic wedge motives at every step of an ascending major-third cycle. This wedge motive ultimately comes to embody the most critical opposition of the whole quartet: upward semitone motion (usually associated with a striving for major-mode resolution) vs. stepwise descent (usually connoting failure and futility). In terms of mimetic engagement, we sense a

²⁸ My use of the term “narrative” aligns with Byron Almén, who defines it as “articulating the dynamics and possible outcomes of conflict or interaction between elements, rendering meaningful the temporal succession of events, and coordinating these events into an interpretive whole” (Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2008], 13).

FIGURE 3. Barber, Op. 11, first movement, opening: mm. 1–6

Molto allegro e appassionato

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello

f

Chromatic Wedge Motive

Arrival on D-Major Harmony

Descending Semitone Overturns Prior Achievement

B-minor Tonic Established

great deal of energy being expended here in order to achieve the high articulation of D-major harmony, with G \sharp to A at the melodic highpoint. The G \sharp is an applied leading tone (\sharp^4 within a brief D-major context), but although it temporarily achieves its goal (A) it does not establish a stable tonic. And the ineffectiveness of the peak cadential gesture immediately becomes clear when the melodic agent slumps back down with octaves that invert the prior semitone, hammering down from A to G \sharp , a gesture that overturns the prior upward effort and shatters any major-mode stability. The music subsequently retreats, liquidating into a simple oscillation between tonic and dominant in the quartet's home key: B minor. In short, there is a brief attempt at major-mode closure in the upper register, but it quickly falls back to the minor mode, with an anemic resolution to B minor (featuring no leading tones, complete chords, or strong-beat emphasis).

The end of the movement presents an even greater sense of failure (see Figure 4). The wedge motive returns, piling up over a two-octave span in preparation for several climactic cadential progressions. Again, the music features a great deal of *agential* energy; we can easily imagine the music as a sentient persona striving upward. But what is the goal? The music directly preceding this moment features a recapitulatory second theme in the movement's parallel major (B major), and the chords in m. 186 seem intent on securing this key. They involve a simple cadential progression from IV to V, but the expected tonic is displaced by a ii chord (C \sharp minor) and the leading tone in the upper voice is left unresolved when the violin overshoots its target (mimicking the contour of the wedge motive). There is a second try in m. 188, but it begins this time from a minor subdominant, and instead of the prior ii chord, a Neapolitan C-major now displaces the tonic. The music reaches a melodic high point with this second attempt, but the leading tone remains unresolved. And any potential for major-mode closure has already been undermined by the subversive semitone descent (E major to E minor, C \sharp minor to C

FIGURE 4. Barber, Op. 11, first movement, conclusion: mm. 184–201

The musical score for Barber, Op. 11, first movement, conclusion: mm. 184–201, is presented in two systems. The first system (mm. 184–191) features four staves (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass) in B major and 3/4 time. The music begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *cresc. molto* instruction, leading to a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second system (mm. 192–201) is marked *più mosso* and shows a decrescendo from piano (*p*) to pianissimo (*pp*). The score includes dynamic markings (*p*, *f*, *mp*, *pp*) and articulation (accents, slurs).

major). B major ultimately arrives at m. 191, but it does so in the *lower* register. More importantly, it is no longer approached by the correct cadential harmonies. Instead of subdominant and dominant, it is preceded by remote B \flat - and F-major chords. The melody reproduces the correct intervals of the wedge motive (with a slow, augmented rhythm), but it ultimately undermines the tonic status of B major, with lowered $\hat{7}$ in the melody and a tritone bass progression. The remaining music simply dissolves chromatically into the final descending semitone, C \sharp to B, the same motive established in m. 4 as a sign of rejection and despair.

This sense of leading-tone failure occurs in the middle of the movement as well, but not always with the same exaggerated gestures. The second theme, for instance, is far more stable.

FIGURE 5. Barber, Op. 11, first movement, second theme: mm. 38–42

The musical score for the second theme of Barber's Op. 11, first movement, measures 38–42, is presented for four staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The key signature is E major. The tempo changes from *rall. molto* to *a tempo* at measure 38, which is circled and labeled 'm. 38'. The score is divided into an Antecedent section (measures 38–39) and a Consequent section (measures 40–42). A Half Cadence occurs in measure 39, and a Plagal Cadence occurs in measure 41. Dynamics include *pp* (pianissimo), *mp* (mezzo-piano), and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The Viola and Violoncello parts feature triplets in measures 39 and 40. The Violoncello part has an *espr.* (espressivo) marking in measure 42.

Figure 5 shows the first occurrence of the theme in the exposition (in the key of E major). It begins with a simple antecedent–consequent period: a half cadence in m. 39 followed by a plagal cadence in m. 41 (with upper voice G \sharp). Note that the D \sharp leading tone in m. 39 is left unanswered. It is replaced in m. 41 with a Mixolydian D \natural (lowered $\hat{7}$) and the subsequent music simply sinks down into the plagal cadence.²⁹ A similar cadence occurs shortly after and the movement thus proceeds into the closing section and development without strong tonal closure. This is not atypical: the movement progresses with a great deal of energy—as expected in a stormy, minor-mode, first-movement allegro—but it continually lapses into moments of sluggish exhaustion. And the lack of leading-tone resolution reinforces the sense of failure.

This basic narrative—the music’s inability to ascend toward major-mode closure—carries over into the Adagio in a number of significant ways. Gestures of yielding descent are palpable throughout: not only does the key drop down a semitone from B to B \flat minor, but the

²⁹ I consider the first violin’s E, in the anacrusis to m. 40, to be not a resolution of the prior D \sharp , but rather a re-beginning after the half-cadence interruption.

FIGURE 6. Barber, Op. 11, Adagio: “failed” leading tones in the opening measures

Violin I
pp espr. cantando

Violin II
pp

Viola
pp

Violoncello
pp

First Fall of a Potential Leading Tone

Second Fall of a Potential Leading Tone

Adagio is also suffused with sighing figures, especially 4–3 suspensions. And there is almost no satisfying leading-tone resolution in the entire movement. The Adagio passes by without a *single* authentic cadence and features several critical moments when leading tones fall away from their upper targets and sink down by either semitone or whole tone. This happens at the very outset of the movement in a subtle but significant way (see Figure 6). Assuming that we retain the first movement’s B-minor tonic in our ears, the opening B \flat of the Adagio will sound like a leading tone (A \sharp) that fails to resolve upward and instead yields to the gravity of B \flat minor, ultimately sighing into a 4–3 suspension over dominant harmony.

This initial failure foreshadows a more explicit sighing gesture in mm. 4–5, which will become critically important at the climax of the Adagio movement. The A \flat -major harmony in m. 4 suggests V/III, with the melodic C adopting the role of a hopeful leading tone to D \flat , the relative major. The subsequent chord is indeed a D \flat harmony, but the C never resolves upward and instead becomes an unstable seventh in a D \flat $\frac{6}{5}$ chord. This allows for two possible resolutions. The expected option is that it will function as an “essential” dissonance, a chordal seventh

in which the C is denied its leading-tone potential and instead resolves down into the subsequent harmony. The other, less likely possibility is for the C to resolve upward *within* the D \flat harmony, with a desired resolution of leading-tone energy.³⁰ Barber, of course, opts for the former, but the tension between these two possibilities embodies the central dichotomy of the quartet and has important ramifications throughout the rest of the movement.³¹

The sighing gesture in mm. 4–5 is also notable in that it completely overturns the desperate climb of the preceding measures. As discussed above, we can easily perceive the Adagio's main melodic subject anthropomorphically as an individual persona that attempts to rise up against gravity while carrying a heavy burden. All of this effort in the opening measures is overturned, however, when the first violin falls back to the opening pitch with the failed leading tone in mm. 4–5.

This has direct repercussions in the subsequent music (see Figure 7). At m. 11, the music arrives once again on the A \flat -major chord (V/III), but this time there is a special sense of urgency. Perhaps remembering the prior failure, the violin escapes from the melodic C with the most energetic gesture thus far: a tritone leap to G \flat . This creates extraordinary tension after the preceding chant-like melody. It also amplifies the expectation for leading-tone resolution, especially when the second violin re-emphasizes C with an octave leap. The G \flat resolves, as expected, to F; but the leading tone, C \sharp , once again falls away from its target, this time by slip-

³⁰ These possibilities relate to Kirnberger's well-known distinction between essential and accidental dissonance (*wesentlich* vs. *zufällig*). See Joel Lester, *Compositional Theory in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 242.

³¹ It has been suggested to me privately that we shouldn't expect leading-tone resolution in the Adagio movement because it is, primarily, a modal piece. Although of course I agree that there are occasional Aeolian inflections, and certain motet-like stylistic traits, the movement is not modal in any strict sense. $\hat{7}$ is often raised, and the harmonic language often reflects nineteenth-century tonal progressions (with dominant-seventh chords, half-diminished seventh chords, and Neapolitan harmonies). The Renaissance style and the modal inflection help reinforce the lack of goal-directed energy, but, as in the first movement, Barber stages the possibility of leading-tone closure at critical junctures in the music.

Figure 7. Barber, Op. 11, Adagio: mm. 8–19

The musical score for Barber's Op. 11, Adagio, measures 8–19, is presented for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The score includes several annotations and dynamics. The Violin I part features a 'Tritone Leap' and a 'Failed Leading Tone'. The Violin II part has a 'Failed Leading Tone'. The Viola part is marked 'p espr. cantando'. The Violoncello part has a 'Contrapuntal Cadence with Leading Tone Resolution' and a 'Linear Descent into Plagal Cadence'. The B-Flat Minor Plagal Cadence is also indicated. Dynamics include *pp*, *p*, *mf*, and *p*.

ping down chromatically to C \flat .

This is a poignant moment, a clear dismissal of major-mode closure. But the subsequent measures surprisingly achieve leading-tone resolution with a contrapuntal cadence in D \flat major. This is, without question, the most positive event in the entire Adagio movement. It is the only real resolution of leading-tone energy and—more importantly—the only strong acquisition of the major mode. The achievement is short lived, however. The peak D \flat in m. 15 initiates a linear stepwise descent of a sixth to F \sharp . And this descent is particularly notable in that it produces the only cadence on the tonic in the entire movement (a plagal cadence).

These failures at the outset of the Adagio re-appear in a different guise at the climax (see Figure 8). This passage is the apex of an extended fugal process: the piece builds to this moment

FIGURE 8. The climax of Barber's Adagio, Op. 11: movement II, mm. 43–56

The musical score for the climax of Barber's Adagio, Op. 11, movement II, measures 43–56, is presented in two systems. The first system shows the piano and violin parts with a dynamic of *f* (forte) and a *cresc. sempre* (crescendo sempre) marking. The second system, starting at measure 50, shows the piano part with a dynamic of *ffz* (fortissimo zingando) and a *pp* (pianissimo) marking. A section of chords is transposed from measures 4-5, and a B minor chord is highlighted as disrupting the sequence.

Chords transposed from measures 4 - 5

B minor chord disrupts sequence

with three points of imitation that progressively descend in range: first violin on the tonic (m. 1), viola on the subdominant (m. 12), and cello on the tonic (m. 28). As shown in Figure 8, the buildup toward climax begins in m. 44 when the second violin initiates a final point of imitation on the subdominant but quickly breaks off to join the other strings in an upward surge toward the extreme upper register (capped by stretto imitation and tenuto articulation). This leads to the brilliant, luminescent harmonies of mm. 50–53, the highpoint of the movement and arguably the pinnacle of the entire quartet.³²

These harmonies are startling not just because of their range and intensity, but also because of their unusual relationship to the tonic of the movement. The passage culminates with an extraordinary F^{\flat} -major harmony, startlingly remote from the Adagio's prevailing B^{\flat} -minor tonality. The movement had drifted flatward toward the subdominant at a few earlier spots, but nothing this extreme, and the event demands hermeneutic interpretation. What might these chords signify?

One obvious answer is that they offer a glimpse of some transcendent and distant reality far removed from B^{\flat} minor, the key that primarily defines the Adagio's sonic environment. The fact that the music subsequently sinks back toward the tonic—after the deep silence in m. 53—suggests that this remote, major-mode world is nothing but a mirage, a vision of the impossible. But what makes the moment especially tragic is not simply that the vision is unattainable but that it required such extreme *effort* to produce. The whole Adagio creates an extraordinary sense of human agency—an unyielding, individual effort to rise up, step-by-step, into the extreme upper

³² Although the approach to climax can be viewed as the striving gestures of a single, unitary consciousness, it also lends itself to interpretation in terms of multiple agents. Indeed, we might even argue that the climax can only be achieved as the result of a group effort—a consolidation of individual forces. As mentioned above, I don't consider such viewpoints entirely incompatible with the single-agent narrative that I promote throughout this essay.

register of the climax. Thus the failure to sustain this distant, major-mode vision is all the more painful because of the prolonged effort that precedes it.

The highest note here is the stratospheric B \flat on the downbeat of m. 50, the tonic pitch of the movement. If one imagines that the preceding music is directed toward tonal closure (and remember that there hasn't yet been a single authentic cadence in the entire movement) then this climax might best be interpreted as a failed attempt to establish tonic stability in the extreme upper range. In that case, the modal approach to a weak, first-inversion tonic followed by falling fifths into an F \flat -major chord reinforces the music's inability to cadence—the agent precariously hangs on to the high, unstable B \flat , but ultimately slips down into remote harmony.

But B \flat is not the only possible goal of this passage. Indeed, part of what makes this climax so effective is that it resonates with other moments both in the Adagio and in the quartet in general. A more intriguing way to hear this moment, then, is not as a failure to *sustain* B \flat as a stable tonic pitch, but as a failure to rise *above* B \flat . To appreciate this possibility, we must first recognize that the final three chords of the climax—G \flat major, C \flat $\overset{6}{5}$, and F \flat major—are a transposition, down a whole tone in pitch-class space, of the chords from mm. 4–5. That, of course, was the moment when C—a potential leading tone to D \flat —yielded to gravity and slipped down to B \flat . What this means is that the high B \flat at the climax is in an analogous position to that earlier leading tone. And at this point, far more is at stake. The approach to this climax features the quartet's most vigorous and extended upward exertion thus far, and the goal, it appears, is not D \flat major (the relative major of B \flat minor) but *C \flat major*, enharmonically the parallel major of the opening movement. The entire Adagio, then, can be heard as an attempt to rise up out of the mire of B \flat minor in order to achieve the lost parallel major of the first movement (which, as we saw in Figure 4, failed to secure a B-major cadence in the high upper register).

The problem, however, is that these climactic chords in the Adagio no longer offer any realistic potential for leading-tone resolution in the upper voice. Everything up until this point—including the prior instances of this chord progression, as well as the general use of suspensions and sighing figures throughout the movement—tells us that this high B \flat will eventually yield to gravity and drop down by step. Moreover, the first violinist is already strained enough as it is, trying to sustain this high B \flat (and doing so while playing double-stops—first an octave and then a major seventh with C \flat below). The quartet texture, as opposed to the orchestral arrangement, makes especially palpable the physical challenge that the performers face trying to sustain those upper pitches. *Everything*, in other words, points toward the eventual downward resolution of the high B \flat . Nevertheless, what I’m proposing here is that by opening a fleeting vision of C \flat major at this point, Barber offers a hidden clue about the larger multi-movement narrative. C \flat major suddenly appears but *with the precise sequence of chords that we now know are incapable of capturing it*. Thus, although this climax concludes with radiant major-mode harmonies, it nevertheless represents one of the most spectacular failures of the entire quartet.

The result is a shocked silence followed by a low echo of the prior sigh—a gesture that triggers a whole chain of sighing chords, an extended sequence of falling fifths that ultimately sinks back to the dominant of B \flat minor. The descending sequence is obvious, but a B-minor triad breaks the pattern in m. 55, implying a G \sharp \flat chord with missing root. It is a subtle but potentially significant moment. Immediately after the movement fails to achieve C \flat major, the enharmonic parallel major of the whole quartet, we get a brief *B-minor* triad disrupting the sequential pattern as an augur of things to come.

The Adagio’s ensuing reprise projects complete and utter futility (see Figure 9); as the theme fades away, we are left with the final F-major chord, a remarkably attenuated dominant,

FIGURE 9. Barber, Op. 11: the Adagio's conclusion, mm. 63–69

with yet another enervated leading tone dying away in the upper voice. Indeed, the double articulation of F major at the end of the movement, with each chord held for several seconds, renders the dominant so anemic that it actually takes on a kind of tonic status, if only in the sense that the harmony now projects no real expectation for resolution.

PART TWO: MODAL CONFLICT AND THE SONATA TRADITION

Figure 10 shows a formal overview of the complete Op. 11 quartet. The first movement, as already noted, has a fairly traditional sonata form (especially for 1936). The third movement reprises the material from the first movement, but with drastic alterations. The most significant of these is the elimination of the second theme from both the exposition and recapitulation. The second theme represents the only stable, major-mode music in the entire quartet—despite the leading-tone complications discussed above—and at the end of the first movement, it offers a real possibility for closure in the movement's parallel major. The music fails to achieve that goal, despite extraordinary efforts, but the central dramatic question—will the piece end in major or minor?—remains prominent throughout the rest of the quartet.

Figure 10. Overview of the complete quartet, Op. 11

I. First Movement: Sonata Allegro, B Minor				
Primary Theme	Secondary Theme	Development	Primary Theme	Secondary Theme
B Minor	E Major		B Minor	B Major
II. Second Movement: Adagio, B\flat Minor				
Arch Form, with Renaissance, Fugal Polyphony				
III. Third Movement: Sonata Allegro, B\flat Minor to B Minor				
Primary Theme	Secondary Theme	Development	Primary Theme	Secondary Theme
B \flat Minor			Rewritten P Theme, B Minor	

Needless to say, these battles between major and minor are familiar from a long tradition of modal conflict in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sonata movements, especially after Beethoven's Fifth and Ninth Symphonies. For Hepokoski and Darcy, the minor mode is "generally interpretable within the sonata tradition as a sign of a troubled condition seeking transformation (emancipation) into the parallel major mode. . . . Minor-mode sonatas contend with the initial presence of the tonic minor—often a turbulent or threatening expressive field—either to overcome it or to be overcome by it."³³

We have no way of knowing whether or not Barber was consciously grappling with earlier sonata archetypes, but, as we've already seen, the music continually creates the impression of a persona struggling upward to secure a major-mode tonic (and failing to do so). Moreover, the fate of the second theme is especially revealing. Remember that Barber originally wrote a third-movement rondo in the key of B major, fulfilling a heroic narrative in which the music shakes off the minor-mode lament of the Adagio and proceeds to an ecstatic B-major conclusion. His subsequent decision to replace that movement with the altered reprise constitutes

³³ Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 306.

a clear rejection of the major-mode outcome, especially given that he excises all traces of the second theme.

This is not to say, however, that the third movement lacks drama with regard to modal conflict. In fact, the final movement *showcases* such conflict in a variety of ways. Consider one simple point of comparison between the outer movements, shown in Figure 11a–b. In the opening movement, after the first theme flames out with its weak articulation of B minor, the piece sinks into a relaxed, idyllic space that initially suggests C major—the whole environment proposed as a possible candidate for the movement’s second theme. But the passage is tonally ambiguous, with a strong hint of G major, and the oscillating fragments fail to cohere into anything substantial.³⁴ Moreover, the shift to the major mode is entirely *unearned*, to borrow a term from Robert Hatten.³⁵ It is approached with slow, sinking gestures, suggesting perhaps a retreat inward, a kind of temporary daydream or mirage, rather than any real achievement on the protagonist’s part. And the lack of stability is confirmed when the agent quickly snaps out of this moment with an aggressive, destabilizing return to the primary theme material, wiping away the major-mode fantasy of the prior measures.

When this same music returns in the third movement, it is transposed down a step to the key of C \flat major, the enharmonic parallel major and the proposed goal of the entire quartet. But just as at the Adagio’s climax, the music that opens up C \flat major is music that we already know to be incapable of truly capturing it. As with the first movement, the potential second-theme status of this music is revealed as an illusion. It is quickly washed away with transitional material

³⁴ Unsurprisingly, this “failed” second theme features more muted, unresolved leading tones. The Bs in mm. 11 and 13 are left hanging, and their lack of energy—along with a blending of C- and G-major harmonies—contributes to the ambiguity of the passage: Are these leading tones within C major? Or stable members of a G-major tonic?

³⁵ Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 18.

FIGURE 11.

(a) Barber, Op. 11, first movement: “failed” second theme, mm. 8–17

Second Theme? C/G major

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Return of Primary Theme Material

(b) Barber, Op. 11, movement III: “failed” second theme, mm. 9–14

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

that dissolves into a clipped development section, passing over the real second theme altogether.

Nevertheless, the possibility of major-mode closure becomes surprisingly viable in the recapitulation with a re-composed primary theme in B minor, shown in Figure 12. As we've seen, both the first movement and the Adagio culminated in dramatic failures to secure a major-mode tonic in the extreme upper register. Here, we get the most exaggerated failure thus far, with a gesture that strongly resonates with prior events. The music rises up with repeated statements of the familiar wedge motive, but instead of leaping upward through a major-third cycle, we get a determined climb up *each step* of the chromatic scale starting from B, shifting wildly between registers as it goes. The passage projects the most vigorous and energetic upward effort of any moment in the entire quartet. And the difficulty of the climb becomes especially pronounced in m. 60, when the melodic agent gets stuck on G \flat , a heavily weighted $\hat{6}$. The only way to overcome this, apparently, is with insistent repetition, acceleration, and *tenuto* articulation—remarkably similar to the energy exertion that we saw at the climax of the Adagio. In this case it eventually allows for the break-through moment when the agent launches upward with a raised $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$, a melodic path that suggests a genuine attainment of the parallel major in the exact same upper register that marked the Adagio's climactic failure. Here, the protagonist—the melody as an anthropomorphic agent—finally achieves the desired tonic note, but the sudden victory is undone by a lack of harmonic support. The crucial melodic ascent through G \sharp and A \sharp occurs not over dominant harmony, but rather an altered submediant (G \sharp minor). And immediately after the attainment of the high B, the chords in the lower strings ominously restate the wedge motives over a missing third before ultimately unveiling the minor tonic. The high, unsupported B \flat s simply fade away. The ending, then, is unsurprisingly tragic, projecting an extraordinary sense of disillusionment: the whole multi-movement trajectory aims for a single, extreme melodic goal,

FIGURE 12. Barber, Op. 11, movement III: conclusion, mm. 55–73

Chromatic ascent toward upper octave...

Presto

Violin I *f*

Violin II *f*

Viola *f*

Violoncello *f*

ascent is blocked by G-natural...

attainment of melodic goal

Vln. I *ff*

Vln. II *ff*

Vla. *ff*

Vc. *ff*

No harmonic support for major-mode tonic

mf *ff*

but its attainment ultimately changes nothing. And the movement ends with the same semitone gestures that we heard at the end of the first movement. The only significant difference is that instead of empty, whimpering octaves in the final measures (as we had seen at the end of the first movement), the music now settles on a full fortissimo minor tonic, a definitive rejection of the major mode.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

For Hepokoski and Darcy, minor-mode sonatas carry a special “burden.”³⁶ This is suggestive in that it associates the minor mode with a sense of weight, something that the protagonist (the work-as-agent) must overcome. In Barber’s Op. 11, this association is especially significant in that the most important attempts at major-mode closure all occur with a melodic ascent into the highest registers as if the music is indeed attempting to break loose from the gravity and weight of the minor mode. The tragedy of the quartet, of course, is that it fails to do so—a tragedy that is all the more powerful when we engage the piece mimetically, imagining the extreme effort in every ascending arc.

This mode of listening not only sensitizes us to the physicality of the music but also draws important cross-movement connections that have hitherto gone unnoticed. This is not to say, of course, that we need the outer movements in order to appreciate the dramatic trajectory of the Adagio movement on its own. Obviously, Barber himself had no problem separating the movement from its original context; he twice arranged the Adagio as an independent piece: first as the *Adagio for Strings* (1938) and then as the choral *Agnus Dei* (1967). Indeed, some might even argue that the Adagio is better off as an independent piece, as it is remarkably out of place,

³⁶ Hepokoski and Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory*, 306.

stylistically speaking, from the more modernist outer movements.

Nevertheless, the quartet's cross-movement connections amplify, in many ways, the crucial features that make the *Adagio* so powerful as an elegiac work. The *Adagio* exhibits many topics and tropes that create a mournful atmosphere—the slow moving strings, the ubiquitous sighing motives, and the Renaissance “sacred” polyphony, to name a few—but melodic agency and musical narrative are especially important. The piece hinges, in many ways, on our sense of a persona struggling upward against tremendous resistance. What I hope to have shown with this essay is that the musical embodiment in such passages actually resonates throughout the quartet, coalescing into a larger story. And although the gestures that I focus so much attention on are fairly simple, rooted in straight-forward attempts at leading-tone resolution, they have considerable ramifications. As Olin Downes points out in his 1938 review, “the composition is most simple at the climaxes when it develops that the simplest chord or figure is the one most significant.”³⁷

³⁷ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 168.

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1936) is undoubtedly the most famous elegiac work of the twentieth-century. We know it from movies, television, and highly publicized memorial services. Yet the music was originally written as the second movement of Barber's string quartet, op. 11, with a number of interesting connections to the outer movements. This article highlights several recurring gestures throughout op. 11 that suggest the will of an individual "agent" struggling against gravity and weight. It proposes a broad, multi-movement narrative that draws together the three movements with a special focus on mimetic engagement, leading-tone resolution, and the quest for major-mode closure.

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