

The Banks of Green Willow
George Butterworth (1885–1916)

Written: 1913

Style: Early 20th century British

Duration: Six minutes

The BBC calls George Butterworth “the most well-known of [British] composers who never returned from the killing fields of Flanders.” His reputation rests on a strikingly small body of works, most of them songs. George Butterworth’s mother was a singer and his father a solicitor who later became the general manager of the North Eastern Railway. George went to school at Eton and then enrolled at Trinity College, Oxford, to become a solicitor like his father. While at Trinity, he met the great folk song collector Cecil Sharp and the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. Butterworth abandoned his studies for music and moved to London where he wrote music criticism for the *Times*, and later enrolled at the Royal College of Music. In 1911, Butterworth set six poems from Alfred Edward Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* to music and a year later, he set five more. In that same year he wrote a *Rhapsody for Orchestra* originally called “The Cherry Tree” (the first line of one of Housman’s poems from *A Shropshire Lad*). The outbreak of World War I put an end to Butterworth’s composing but seemed to give the young composer a new sense of purpose in life. He enlisted in the Durham Light Infantry. Before he shipped out, he destroyed a good portion of his compositions—works he considered “unworthy.”

Butterworth’s bravery in the trenches earned him a Military Cross and he was recommended for a second. However, before he could receive it, he was killed in a raid during the Battle of Somme. He never received a proper interment back in England. Instead, he was buried in the trenches in France.

Butterworth based *The Banks of Green Willow* on two folk songs that he collected in 1907. In spite of the pastoral quality of the melodies quoted in the piece, the subject matter of the songs—desertion—is more sobering. In *Green Willow*, a young woman elopes with a sea captain and delivers a child while on board ship. At her request, the captain throws both her and the baby overboard. In *Green Bushes*, a young woman abandons her lover for a more appealing suitor.

Butterworth wrote his *The Banks of Green Willow* before World War I even started, but it is often seen as emblematic of the “lost generation” from that war, and is often played to commemorate it.

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Adagio for Strings
Samuel Barber (1910–1981)

Written: 1936–38

Style: Contemporary American

Duration: Eight minutes

Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* is a serious piece of music that is firmly embedded in the consciousness of nearly every American. Those who are old enough will remember that it was broadcast when John F. Kennedy

died. It is often featured at funerals of famous persons, including those of President Franklin Roosevelt and Albert Einstein. It's been used in television commercials and in the movies *Elephant Man* and *El Norte*. Perhaps the most famous example is its use as background music for the 1986 Academy Award winning film *Platoon*. When Americans need to express their grief, they turn to the *Adagio for Strings*.

Barber's *Adagio* might not have this popularity without the efforts of one of the great conductors of the twentieth century, Arturo Toscanini. This tempestuous conductor was famous for his fiery interpretations of Beethoven and Wagner and Verdi. Samuel Barber met Toscanini almost by chance while he was a student in Italy. Barber and his friend Gian Carlo Menotti went to the island of San Giovanni to visit Mrs. Toscanini. She was not available, but Arturo himself received them and proceeded to entertain them for the entire day. A friendship developed, and eventually Toscanini informed Barber that he would like to perform one of his works. It took Barber three years to write something that he felt Toscanini would accept. It was his *First Essay for Orchestra*. Along with that work, he sent an arrangement for a five-part string orchestra of something he had written in 1936, the slow movement from his *String Quartet in B Minor*. Toscanini sent them both back without comment. Barber was too nervous to approach Toscanini for a verdict, so he sent Menotti by himself. He explained that Barber couldn't come because he was not feeling very well. "I don't believe that," remarked Toscanini. "He's mad at me. Tell him not to be mad. I'm not going to play one of his pieces. I'm going to play them both."

Aaron Copland had a positive opinion of the piece: "It's really well felt, it's believable you see, it's not phony." And the composer William Schumann gives a wonderfully concise listening guide: "It's so precise emotionally. It begins, it reaches its climax, it makes its point, and it goes away."

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Ein Deutsches Requiem, Op. 45

Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

Written: 1857–68

Movements: Seven

Style: Romantic

Duration: 70 minutes

No one is certain what prompted Brahms to compose the *Requiem*. He began it in 1857 but didn't finish it until 1868. It is likely that he intended it as a memorial to his great friend and benefactor, Robert Schumann, who died in 1856. It was Robert and Clara Schumann who had encouraged the young Brahms to concentrate on composition rather than a career as a pianist. Additionally, the death of his mother in 1865 has a close association with the completion of the *Requiem*.

The full title of the piece, "*A German Requiem with Scriptural Text*," indicates the most obvious distinction of this great work. The traditional *Requiem* is a Roman Catholic Mass for the dead. Brahms, a Protestant, abandoned the traditional prayers from the Mass, choosing instead texts from the Bible (as translated by Luther). He specifically avoided a prayer for the dead, which is contrary to Lutheran creed, and left out the "fire and brimstone" of the *Dies Irae* found in the traditional *Requiem*. The dark, unusually low registers, and the use of archaic musical techniques such as counterpoint, fugue, and modal scales, lend an air of reverence and contemplation to the work.

The first movement begins with an orchestral section that introduces several of the important vocal themes to follow. It also sets the dark tone of the piece by excluding the violins and clarinets. The second movement is an adaptation of a work that Brahms had composed earlier in life and then discarded. Melodies based on the Phrygian mode, used in ancient music to portray sorrow and death, gives this movement its distinctive sound. The third and sixth movements include fugues, again an attempt to create a mood of antiquity. The fourth movement, "How Lovely Are Thy Dwelling Places," is a reassuring, soaring chorus, reminiscent of Mendelssohn's great oratorio, *Elijah*. Brahms added the fifth movement, for soprano and chorus, after the *Requiem's* premiere in 1868, in memory of his mother. The last movement corresponds to the first, except that this time it isn't those who mourn who are blessed. Rather, it is those "who die in the Lord." The *Requiem* ends the way it began, with reassuring tranquility. In the words of Clara Schumann, "It is a truly tremendous piece of art which moves the entire being in a way little else does."

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