At Home with Barber: *Vanessa* and the Queer 1950s

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Abstract

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Even with the continued growth of queer musicology, composer Samuel Barber remains largely absent in literature on gay American musical life. Although popular with audiences, academic consideration of Barber has been limited because of his perceived conservatism. This project enriches Barber studies by revisiting his Romantic aesthetic in the context of his sexuality, revealing an investment in the domestic realm that complicates previous descriptions of mid-twentieth-century modernist-focused queer aesthetics. Barber's first opera *Vanessa* (1958), with a libretto by his partner Gian Carlo Menotti, provides a helpful window onto these issues because of its exploration of sentimentality and domestic space. Following approaches developed within queer affect theory, I explore how Barber's sexuality colors his work on a global scale, altering the sonic environment he creates. At the same time, I aim to create a fuller portrait of Barber's sexuality that stresses the lived, day to day negotiations he made as a gay man in 1950s America, looking to general patterns of behavior rather than public self-identification.

This project outlines how *Vanessa* captures Barber's experience by showing the queer potential of domestic space and the sentimental mode. Chapter 1 traces how the private home in *Vanessa* offers a refuge for queer love to flourish in an otherwise inhospitable landscape. I argue that Barber explores the virtue and risk of interiority, whereby withdrawing to the home protects new forms of love at the cost of isolation and social illegibility. Barber enacts this by motivically juxtaposing characters' interior emotions with generically social music; public music such as hymns and dances are rendered grotesque and unsympathetic to the internal struggles of the idealistic ingénue Erika, who ultimately rejects normative expectations of love. Chapter 2 argues that Barber uses the sentimental mode and melodramatic conventions to emotionally engage with audiences, and by doing so is able to present a sympathetic portrayal of non-normative love. I then explore how associations with this overtly feminized and "middlebrow" genre were taken up by critics to dismiss Barber's compositional integrity. Musically, I focus on Barber's use of traditional operatic forms as well as his "sentimental" sound, looking to the opera's love duets and final quintet.

Résumé

Chez soi avec Barber: *Vanessa* et les 1950s *queer*

Malgré la croissance continue de la musicologie *queer*, le compositeur Samuel Barber demeure fortement absent dans la littérature sur la vie musicale des gais Américains. Quoique Barber soit populaire parmi les publics, les analyses théoriques à son sujet se sont fait limitées du fait de l'estimation de son conservatisme. Le présent projet de recherche enrichira les écrits de Barber en reconsidérant sa sensibilité Romantique dans le contexte de sa sexualité, révélant un dévouement au monde domestique qui aurait su frustrer les descriptions antécédentes de l'esthétique *queer* moderniste du milieu du vingtième siècle. Le premier opéra de Barber, *Vanessa* (1958), dont un livret de son partenaire Gian Carlo Menotti, s'agit plus révélateur sur ces thèmes en raison de son exploitation de la sentimentalité et du milieu domestique. Résultant d'une production par une équipe de réalisation presqu'entièrement homosexuelle, *Vanessa* démontre le potentiel *queer* du chez-soi privé et de la modalité sentimentale en renversant les objectifs hétérosexuels habituels et normatifs, permettant une place pour l'épanouissement de la vie et des sentiments *queer*.

Le présent projet étale comment *Vanessa* capte le vécu de Barber en dévoilant le potentiel *queer* de l'emplacement domestique et du mode sentimental. Le premier chapitre décalque le chez-soi privé de *Vanessa* comme refuge pour l'épanouissement de l'amour *queer* au sein d'un milieu par ailleurs inhospitalier. Je raisonne que Barber explore la vertu et le risque de l'infériorité par lesquelles le retrait au chez-soi protège ces nouvelles formes d'amour au prix de l'isolation et de l'incompréhensibilité sociale. Barber dépeint cela en juxtaposant les motifs émotionnels intimes de ses caractères et la musique d'influence sociale; des oeuvres de musique commune, telles les hymnes et les danses, sont métamorphosées en de pièces grotesques et peu compatissantes aux défis personnels de l'idéaliste ingénue Erika qui fini par rejeter les attentes normatives de l'amour. Le deuxième chapitre déduit que Barber se sert du mode sentimental et des conventions mélodramatiques pour s'engager de façon emotive avec son publique, et en ce faisant peut présenter une interprétation non normative de l'amour. Ensuite j'explore la position des critiques qui ont voulu refouler l'intégrité de la composition de Barber par ses associations avec ce genre manifestement féminisé et philistin. En termes de la musique, je me concentre sur l'usage de Barber des formes traditionnelles du chant lyrique ainsi que le son sentimental de sa composition, focalisant sur les duos d'amour et la quintette finale de cet opéra.

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Translation by Kelly Symons

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KCK
Evanston, Illinois

Introduction

In June of 1994, K. Robert Schwarz published an article in the New York Times addressing the recent queer turn within musicology.[1] Presented with several other queer themed articles celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, his piece surveys gay composers within American musical life, questioning why it has taken academics so long to acknowledge the homosexuality of composers like Samuel Barber. Schwarz particularly faults Barbara Heyman's 1992 "mammoth" study of Barber for never using the word homosexual, despite its claims of comprehensiveness and objectivity.[2] For Schwarz, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* demonstrates the "quaint, almost Victorian reticence" of the musicological field by refusing to fully identify Barber as gay.

By the early 1990s, queer musicology had only just started to achieve visibility in published scholarship. Schwarz's article captures the political vigor of early queer musicology, heavily citing authors like Susan McClary and Philip Brett who were identifying the diverse and necessary work to be done within the burgeoning subfield. For its proponents, sexuality-inflected scholarship afforded political representation that demonstrated the importance of queer life in Western art music. Susan McClary argues that fully acknowledging a composer's homosexuality

> counter[s] the homophobia still present; it would offer an illustrious history for gay individuals today—a source of deserved pride rather than shame… it would permit much more interesting and human readings of music.[3]

Calling for greater representation of queer figures within scholarship, McClary stresses how historical icons form communitarian pride, stating that important queer artists can be used as a

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[1] Robert K. Schwarz, "Composers' Closets Open for All to See," *New York Times,* 19 June 1994.
[2] Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[3] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 78.

weapon to combat oppression. Ignoring or obscuring these queer lives by "filling biographies with bogus girlfriends" or other forms of biographical sanitization, musicologists enable a closeting and shaming environment where alternative sexualities are not worthy of discussion, least of all celebration.[4] Schwarz performs "desanitization" by publicizing the homosexuality of gay American composers while also examining the intense homophobia they faced from critics and other composers. Within Schwarz's view, by not explicitly discussing Barber's sexuality, Heyman enables and continues this longstanding shaming silence about homosexuality within musical discourse.

A few weeks after the article was published, Heyman defended her work in a letter to the editor. Titled "Barber: No Need of Any Label," Heyman's response states that she does in fact discusses Barber's homosexual relationships, such as with his longtime partner Gian Carlo Menotti and his later companion Valentine Herranz, but only when they "bear on his creativity."[5] For Heyman, Barber's homosexuality is a "given," and "the current emphasis on sexuality as obligatory—and the lumping together of creative artists by sex or sexual orientation—tends to obscure rather than reveal the individuality of a composer's voice."[6] While not committing any of the biographical rewriting that McClary warns of, Heyman's ambivalence towards sexuality based research belies her interest in providing the fullest context for Barber's life and work. As she states in the introduction, looking to Barber's life provides necessary information for understanding his works and the greater twentieth-century American musical landscape.[7] The foundation for all Barber studies, Heyman's book does provide a remarkable survey of his life. Her method largely follows traditional biographical practices of chronology supplemented with

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Barbara Heyman, "Barber: No Need of Any Label," *New York Times*, 10 July 1994.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, viii.

intensive archival research and sketch study. Writing at a time when few scholars discussed issues of sexuality, Heyman eschews contextualizing Barber's sexuality within pre-Stonewall America and instead fleshes out his compositional aesthetic by repeatedly discussing his harmonic "conservatism" in the context of musical modernism, as well as his complicated position as an American composer who was largely uninterested in nationalist projects.

Since its publication, Heyman's book has colored and shaped the few examples of Barber scholarship that have emerged. For example, Howard Pollack documents Barber's Romantic inclination in the context of his relationship with Jean Sibelius,[8] while Benedict Taylor has explored Barber's nationalism in the composer's popular *Knoxville – Summer of 1915* (1947).[9] Even in his collaborations with his partner Menotti, scholars have followed Heyman's close source study approach rather than interrogating the potentially queer content of the work. The most in-depth study of a collaborative work is Stefanie Poxon's 2005 highly detailed and well-presented dissertation on Barber's first opera *Vanessa* (1958), for which Menotti provided the libretto. Looking to the opera's sketches and genesis history, Poxon leaves much to be said about Barber's relationship with Menotti, despite focusing on other controversial aspects of the opera such as the topic of abortion.[10] In fact, Poxon directly cites Heyman as the basis of her understanding of their relationship, limiting herself to "primary sources that are extant as well as Heyman's findings and interpretations that are presented in her monograph."[11] Though Poxon states that she hopes new sources arise, she ends up ignoring any of the personal, queer specificities of Barber and Menotti's relationship aside from basic observations that they were

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[8] Howard Pollack, "Samuel Barber, Jean Sibelius, and the Making of an American Romantic," *Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000).
[9] Benedict Taylor, "Nostalgia and Cultural Memory in Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*," *Journal of Musicology* 25 (2008).
[10] Stefanie Poxon, "From Sketches to Stage: The Genesis of Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*" (PhD dissertation, Catholic University of America, 2005).
[11] Ibid. 2

partners who lived together. I do not mean to ask more of Poxon's project than she sets out to accomplish, but much is lost in her limitation to strict, extant evidence in documenting Barber's relationship with Menotti.

Within the last decade, discussions of Barber's sexuality have emerged in the work of various scholars, who have addressed Barber's relationship to other contemporary queer artists. Nadine Hubbs very briefly mentions Barber in her book which seeks to illuminate the queer origins of the mid-century "American" sound, which for Hubbs is defined by more clearly modernist and nationalistic composers like Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson.[12] Notably, historian Michael Sherry addresses the failure and criticism of Barber's 1966 opera *Antony and Cleopatra* as part of a larger homophobic discourse across the arts. Sherry's discussion of Barber's homosexuality, his network of friends and lovers, and his wider place in the arts world is nuanced and useful, yet his more general historical focus precludes a more in-depth discussion of the specifics of Barber's musical aesthetic.[13] Offering more documentation rather than theorization or musical interpretation, Sherry's work is necessary and well-constructed but lacks a clear conceptualization of the relationship between Barber's sexuality and his music. Following Sherry's work, Jessica Holmes has considered *Vanessa* as a queer text by reading the opera as an articulation of Barber and Menotti's homosexuality in spite of the era's stifling homophobia.[14] Holmes views the opera as a "coming out" narrative and aims to recover this text by showing its affirmative queer politics. By investigating the queer encoding, she follows a well-established

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[12] Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
[13] Michael Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).
[14] Jessica Holmes, "Composing in America's Closet: Queer Encoding in Barber and Menotti's Opera *Vanessa*," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 1 (2008); 53-65.

method within queer musicological scholarship that views music by gay composers as a mode of disclosure of their otherwise socially inarticulable sexualities.

Among other forms of queer scholarship, revealing hidden, private queer meanings within works has been a major hermeneutic project and has become a common mode of analysis for queer musicologists. By looking for coded language or hidden confessions, contemporary scholars aim to hear private articulations of historical queer identity. Two major examples of this mode of analysis can be found in the work of Judith Peraino and Nadine Hubbs. As part of her larger project exploring how music offers a space for individuals to explore their social identity and question compulsory heterosexuality, Peraino posits that music can be used as a confessional act to denote a queer identity.[15] Providing a close reading of the finale of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony, Peraino argues that the composer articulates his sexuality through the use of two different orchestrations of the lament theme; one a queer, "physically wrenching and private act" while the other is a straight "sentimental public ritual."[16] By looking to a detail that is largely inaudible for audiences yet drastically noticeable for the performers and composer, Peraino views this difference as a part of a "transgendered vocality" within the movement that "suggests the disclosure of something unspeakable about the practice of a man, lamenting as if he were a woman."[17] Further stating that "understanding Tchaikovsky's music… means knowing his sexuality," Peraino stresses the degree to which queer identity can be captured by a specific musical gesture within the proper hermeneutic framework.

Nadine Hubbs focuses on the ways that coded meanings emerge from queer social groups. Discussing the circle of gay composers who studied with Nadia Boulanger, she argues

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[15] Judith Peraino, *Listening to Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 68.
[16] Ibid., 92.
[17] Ibid., 91-92.

that coded queer meanings arise in the iconic Americana music of Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Ned Rorem. For Hubbs, works such as Thomson's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* express the composer's and the librettist Gertrude Stein's homosexuality in hidden meanings that would only be accessible to their immediate circle and "other queer subjects who were adept at seeking out more rarefied clues to meanings that might reflect their own lives and experiences."[18] Further, the stylistic genealogy of the tonal language used signifies their alternative sexuality when more explicit labels were unavailable, thus giving the "Frenchness" of the music's stylistic origins a deeper queer meaning. Here codes are used not only to express an individual's sexuality, but rather the collective identity that the group shares. For both Peraino and Hubbs, coded language is a way composers could articulate their sexualities for themselves or audiences without explicit reference, and, now aware of their sexualities, contemporary scholars can return to these moments to reveal hidden queer meanings.

Yet within queer theory, scholars grew dissatisfied with the limitations of these revealing tactics. Writing in 2003, Eve Sedgwick argues that this revealing tactic signals a paranoid position originally taken up by anti-homophobic scholarship during the late 1980s, which eventually became "nearly synonymous with criticism itself" within contemporary queer scholarship.[19] Sedgwick contends that this paranoid reading practice engages in what Paul Ricoeur deems a "hermeneutics of suspicion" where critics are trained to be ever vigilant to find moments where the author reveals deviant or non-normative sexualities. Sedgwick believes this practice limits the kinds of queer knowledge and meanings that can be gathered from a text, framing things as either open or closeted. To assume such a clearly articulated or stable identity ignores the ambivalence Barber and other men of his generation had for publicly expressing their

[18] Hubbs, *Queer Composition*, 47.
[19] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 124.

sexuality. Usually attributed to the repressive closet that queer people faced during the 1950s and earlier, this silence has been questioned, challenged, and criticized in work like Hubbs's and Holmes's. While necessary and important, the political goals of this work has left figures like Barber ignored or misrepresented because they do not fit neatly into the public oriented focus of queer liberationist narratives taken up by identity politics. In other words, within a paranoid reading practice interpretations are limited to intentional, isolated moments of encoding where signs of queer identification are marked as either "closeted" or "out."

Hoping to move beyond this paranoid and binaristic thinking, Sedgwick has explored other ways of accounting for queer meanings within texts by addressing the critical power of emotion and affect. For example, Sedgwick stresses that sexuality permeates the overarching actions of everyday life rather than being found only within singular political statements or performances. Shifting focus to a more global conception of sexuality, in other words, examining the texture of a life, can reveal important queer meanings because texture "comprises an array of perceptual data that includes repetition, but whose degrees of organization hovers just below the level of shape and structure."[20] Sexuality leads to certain repetitions in one's life, habits, styles, and actions, but by framing them in the context of texture, we can see how these repetitions are not always strict, equally weighted, or consciously performed. This is productive for queer theorization because it allows for a holistic body of information that is not only articulated in distinct actions. In Sedgwick's words, texture can move

> conversations away from the recent fixation on epistemology (which suggests that performativity/performance can show us whether or not there are essential truths and how we could, or why we can't, know them) by asking new questions about phenomenology and affect (what motivates performativity and performance, for example, and what individual collective effects are mobilized in their execution?).[21]

[20] Ibid., 16.
[21] Ibid., 17.

When considering a composer's homosexuality in relationship to the work produced in this more flexible affective view, we are able to account for aspects of queer lived experience that may not have been purposely or consciously encoded, or even recognized as part of an established identity category. Still paying attention to the biographical contours of a composer's life, we can see how a queer perspective can manifest itself in the affective texture by paying attention to more idiosyncratic gestures, patterning, and style, thus listening more to the composer's individual voice than the signs of a collective identity category.

In a similar vein, Sara Ahmed discusses the critical potential for considering the phenomenological aspects of sexuality. In her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others,* Ahmed asks a deceptively obvious question regarding sexual orientation: "what does it mean for sexuality to be lived as orientated?"[22] Drawing from the work of Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed provocatively opens up the ephemeral qualities of sexuality, interrogating the ways certain objects and spaces are experienced due to our initial orientation towards them. Specifically, Ahmed claims that

> The differences between how we are orientated sexually are not only a matter of "which" objects we are orientated toward, but also how we extend through our bodies into the world….we could say that orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one's desires, means inhabiting different worlds.[23]

Ahmed's reformulation posits that one's sexuality manifests itself on a sensorial level. Paying attention to these relationships means investigating how certain spaces and objects are more comfortable or available according to our sexuality. Stressing inhabitance, a phenomenological approach to queerness allows for greater sensitivity to the often slight or indescribable affective changes that can be felt just by entering a room. Describing and investigating such moments

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[22] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.
[23] Ibid., 68.

illustrates the emotional, physical relationships we develop with non-living entities, like space and objects, that are affected by sexuality.

Ahmed's phenomenology offers two potential uses for musical scholarship. First, we can think of biographical work as documenting how gay composers managed their own orientations outside of their sexual encounters, examining the social spaces and cultural objects that were available because of their sexuality. Particularly useful for pre-Stonewall composers, a focus on orientation can expose the ways they maneuvered and altered heteronormative spaces, carving out a way for their queerness to exist within an inhospitable atmosphere. For some composers, this was a relatively easy process due to status and a supportive community, while others were plagued by feelings of alienation. Second, we can alter how we use biographical information to understand queer meanings within music on an more immersive, atmospheric level. While specific gay meanings can be deciphered in Barber's work, such as specific references inserted by Menotti to appeal to Barber's taste, approaching a work affectively can account for the feeling of being inside the sonic world created for the listener. Thus, audiences are invited to experience the feeling or sound of being in a queered world, where their own experiences and predispositions can come into play with the environment Barber has created.

The goal of this thesis is to bring these recent developments in queer affect theory to an in depth discussion of one of Samuel Barber's works, namely his 1958 opera *Vanessa*. By doing so I hope to stimulate further understanding of the relationship between his work and sexuality, as well as demonstrate the potential use affect theory has for further musicological scholarship. While I follow queer musicology's belief that Barber's homosexuality affects his compositional output, I do not limit myself to searching for discrete hidden articulations. Taking an affective approach, I see how Barber's sexuality colors his work on a global scale, altering the sonic

environment he creates. At the same time, I aim to create a fuller portrait of Barber's sexuality that stresses the lived day to day negotiations he made as a gay man in 1950s America, looking to general patterns of behavior rather than nonexistent self-proclamations. This in turn allows me to see how his homosexuality effected the environments he shaped and created as well as the style and modes of expression he participated in.

I specifically turn to his first opera *Vanessa* for a few reasons. First, its libretto was written by his partner Gian Carlo Menotti, while the two were living together. The two created the opera as a joint venture and both repeatedly stressed how integral the other was for its creation. Coming from such an intimate origin, *Vanessa* thus embodies both their professional and personal collaboration, as well as their friendship with several other gay friends who contributed, such as set designer Cecil Beaton and the original conductor Dmitri Mitropolous. Second, I turn to the opera because it provides an immersive experience where we can see how Barber sets up interactions and musically dramatizes romantic relationships. Though Menotti provided the libretto, Barber's music shows the sonic world he wished to create for his characters to exist and interact in.

Set in 1905 in a unidentified "Northern" country, the action follows the hermetic Vanessa, who has kept her baronial manor shut off from the world for the last twenty years. Living with her are her mother, the Baroness, who refuses to speak to Vanessa, and her ingénue niece Erika, whose innocence has been protected by her aunt's isolation. Act I begins with the house coming to life with the expected return of Vanessa's lost love Anatol, the reason for her self-imposed hermitage. As Erika obediently tends to her Aunt's demands, Vanessa worries that her love with never come. Finally a figure appears at the doorway, as Vanessa demands to know if he, Anatol, still loves her. However it turns out not to be the original Anatol, but his son. As

Vanessa is carried upstairs in shock, the younger Anatol convinces the timid Erika to join him at the dinner table that was so carefully laid out by Vanessa.

Act II opens with Erika confiding in her grandmother, explaining how Anatol seduced her and that she is now with child. While her Grandmother encourages her to marry him and protect the family's honor, Erika does not want to submit to his false advances. She remains attached to her ideals of love which she feels Anatol can never meet. In the meanwhile, Anatol has been courting Vanessa, the two spending their morning ice skating. She is now happy again and, joined by the family doctor, remembers the grand country balls she used to throw. Vanessa tells Erika of Anatol's proposal to her and her intentions to accept while remaining completely blind to Erika's situation. As the family goes to church, Erika stays behind in the living room and proclaims that she will not accept Anatol's proposal so that her aunt can have him.

Act III takes place a few months later at the New Year's Eve ball Vanessa holds to announce her engagement. The house fully alive and filled with guests, the doctor drunkenly sings of his romantic antics as Vanessa enters distressed. Erika and her mother will not come downstairs to the festivities, showing their disapproval of her actions. Anatol tells her to forget her past and to follow his love into the future. Vanessa swoons and the two embrace. As the doctor begins to announce the engagement Erika emerges clad in a white dress at the top of the staircase, clutching her stomach. Once she hears the official announcement she faints while the peasants begin their local folk dances. Once she is revived by the Major Domo, she declares that Anatol's child will not be born and exits the house into the blustery cold. The Baroness rushes to the door in her nightgown but is unable to call for help.

Act IV is split into two scenes, the first of which takes place in Erika's bedroom. As Anatol and the townsmen look for Erika, Vanessa paces the room not knowing why Erika has

done such a thing. Anatol returns with Erika alive, but her dress is now soaked with blood. Erika admits to her grandmother that she has aborted her child, causing the Baroness to stop speaking to her as well. Vanessa begs Anatol to take her away from this house, and he obliges. After an orchestral interlude the scene opens to the living room where Anatol and Vanessa say their goodbyes before leaving. Vanessa questions Erika about what happened that night leading Erika to say it was just a simple mistake. Before finally leaving, Vanessa sings of the contradictory nature of love, later joined by the others in a five-voiced fugue. The characters break the narrative of the work by talking of Vanessa's delusions, Anatol's manipulations, and Erika's tragic idealism, before returning to their goodbyes. As Erika watches the sleigh pull away, she orders the gates to the house to be closed, declaring that it now her turn to wait.

Vanessa presents a charged atmosphere in which Barber explores the complicated network of feelings brought on by love. This study explores two affective dimensions of how Barber musically explores this love, specifically its relationship to the domestic space and its sentimental expression. Chapter 1 examines the way that domestic space can provide a haven for alternative modes of love to flourish. I begin by examining Barber's personal investment in his home Capricorn which he owned with Menotti for over 30 years. I argue that the privacy and interiority that the domestic offered allow Barber to cultivate an environment that comfortably hosted his composition and relationships, despite its normative associations. I turn to *Vanessa* to see how interiority is dramatized as Erika is potentially forced to leave her privacy because of Anatol's advancements. Ultimately, rejecting public displays of love, Erika embraces the social isolation of a hermetic lifestyle in order to remain true to her ideal notions of love. To show this, I analyze Barber's construction and transformation of musical motives in two scenes where public musical forms are disrupted by unstable material that represents Erika's inner emotions.

Chapter 2 focuses on Barber's sentimentality and its function as a queer mode of expression. The chapter begins by exploring *Vanessa*'s relationship to 1950s melodrama to capture the heighted emotional and gestural rhetoric Barber uses throughout the score. I then explore how associations with this overtly feminized genre were taken up by critics to dismiss Barber's compositional integrity. I argue that Barber's use of the sentimental mode seeks deeper emotional engagement with audiences, akin to other middlebrow forms of culture, and by doing so he is able to present a sympathetic portrayal of non-normative love. Musically, I focus on Barber's use of traditional operatic forms as well as his "sentimental" sound. Specifically, I look to a few of the opera's love duets, as well as its famous ending quintet to examine how Barber blends his technical counterpoint with unabashed lyricism.

Chapter 1

Vanessa's Queer Interiors

In the summer of 1946, monthly magazine *American Home* featured a story on a house designed by famous Swiss architect William Lescaze.[24] Dubbed Capricorn, the residence was home to three "talented, successful and young" artists: Samuel Barber, Gian Carlo Menotti, and Robert Horan. The article, written by the poet Horan, addresses the magazine's focus on design and décor by offering a room-by-room description of the "modern, not moderne" chalet. Noting the personal touches added by the three artists, Horan eloquently describes the home's color stories (mostly grays matched with accent colors like mustard and "Giotto blue"), furniture (mid-century Danish modern) and rugs (Chinese). Horan also explains Capricorn's working atmosphere, as well as the three men's motivations for moving to the country. While searching for a home, they required a space that could "hold three people at amicable distance" and was "quiet, somewhat isolated, in beautiful country, but near New York."[25] Each composer was to have a studio where he could not hear the other, while Horan wanted his own writing den. When found, the house was "a fair balance of economy and proportion," allowing for a hospitable working environment where guests could stay in the backyard cottage without disturbing the artists.

Horan offers a brief bit of domestic philosophy to close:

> For in a house that is properly built into its landscape, with respect for what is outside as well as for what is to be inside, no matter how small may be the dimensions, there can still be a feeling of breath and openness and vitality. To some degree, of course, it is what you do *in* a house as well as what you do *to* it that gives it its character.[26]

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[24] Robert Horan, "And 3 modern Young Men Lead a Modern Life in this Swiss Chalet: Capricorn, Mount Kisco, N.Y.," *American Home*, 14 July 1946, 36.
[25] Ibid., 37.
[26] Ibid.

Though he spends a large portion of the article describing what has been done "to" Capricorn, Horan defines a home by the people that live there, rather than merely the things in it. While the article mainly works to establish the home's muse-like character for the three productive and successful artists, Capricorn also was importantly marked by the men's alternative sexual lifestyle. Beyond its professional use, it was purchased so that Barber and Menotti could own a home together and was a symbol of their long-term romantic relationship. The twenty year old Horan was also gay and had a close personal relationship with the two men who were a decade older than him.[27] Images of the three cozily sitting around the fireplace show the comfort and protection the home offered and resemble other pictures of heterosexual families scattered throughout the magazine. Yet my project is not simply to reveal the secret meanings of the article and find the suppressed queerness hidden throughout the publication's blend of décor and childrearing tips. One could characterize Barber's homosexuality as subverting the publication's normative images of family life. But I want to take a different approach, showing how Barber's home life importantly resonates with trends popularized in post-war domestic discourse. In short, I want to explore how at-home Barber is at home during a time when the domestic was a foundation for heterosexual normativity.

I. Subverting Suburbia: The Queer 1950s Home

When Barber purchased Capricorn he was still actively enlisted in the army, mainly stationed in New York so he could return to Mount Kisco on the weekends.[28] Like his

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[27] While Horan was initially a permanent fixture of Capricorn, the house was always owned by Barber and Menotti. John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 53.

[28] Barber had enlisted in 1942 and served in the army but his poor eyesight limited him to noncombatant duty. He mainly performed office work and later received a commission from the United States Air Force, which led to

compatriots, Barber longed for the war to be over so he could fully return to normal life. As cultural historian Elaine Tyler May has discussed, the post-war home was imagined by soldiers as "a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world," who viewed it as "a vision of abundance and fulfillment."[29] Funded by the economic prosperity of the time and idealized by the creative genius of advertising, the private home dominated the media through consumerist driven advertisements. For May, these images of abundance and success had nationalist implications and were shaped by public policy and political ideology.[30] With political projects brought into the domestic sphere, the family was the keystone for further prosperity because of its ability to reproduce American ideologies of consumption and national pride.

But however much the picture perfect families of *Leave it to Beaver* dominate contemporary conceptions of the 1950s, many people's lived experience negated or subverted these popular images.[31] People like Barber who lived alternative lifestyles showed that not everybody wanted to, or could, function as a straight, white, upper middle class family with a breadwinning father and a happy homemaker mother. By maintaining a stable and productive household with Menotti, Horan, and other queer friends, Barber shows that the home's security and happiness need not be tied to the reproductive family. Rather the success and longevity of Capricorn supported bonds that were not linked by strict bloodlines, acting against the dominant narrative of the home.

People's displeasure with and rejection of these normative structures led to two major critiques at either end of the long 1950s which challenged the stability of sexuality and gender

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composition of the Second Symphony in 1944 (rev. 1950), which he later withdrew. Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 212-217.

[29] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3.

[30] Ibid., 10.

[31] For more on the legacy of 1950s domestic imagery see Mary Caputi, *A Kinder Gentler America: Melancholia and the Mythical 1950s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

roles circulated in domestic imagery.[32] First, Alfred Kinsey's reports on the sexual lives and practices of average American citizens became infamous for their challenging of conventional beliefs and assumptions regarding sex.[33] His report on men's sexual life documented the prevalence of homosexual acts, as well as a vast amount of non-procreative and premarital sex.[34] Fifteen years later, Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique* sought to dispel the myth of the "happy housewife" by considering the economic and emotional inequality that many women faced. Inspired by her conversations with friends and other housewives, Friedan juxtaposed their feelings with the ever-smiling women on TV, exposing the gap between the fictional worlds of advertising and daily life.[35]

The popularity of these works shows their resonance with the American public. Both Kinsey's reports and Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* based their findings on listening to and recording people's real life stories. Stressing actual biographical subjects not only gave their claims veracity, but also allowed for a greater attention to actual lived experience that challenged the glossy fantasy of the mythical good life. The wide diversity of homes and lifestyles articulated in these works shows the complexity of sexuality and gender in America. Further, these narratives showed how people like Barber still engaged in domestic discourse, as demonstrated by his *American Home* appearance, but managed to do so with their own type of family.

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[32] For a discussion of changing values of masculinity see Robert Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 6-9. For a description of 1950s femininity and its cultural legacy see Caputi, *Kinder Gentler,* 4-5.

[33] Kinsey released his Report on male sexuality in 1948, followed by female sexuality in 1953.

[34] Kinsey's report demonstrated that of the men interviewed 85% had had premarital intercourse and 37% had had some sort of homosexual encounter. For more on Kinsey's reception by average Americans see Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 29-37.

[35] For Sara Ahmed this dissatisfaction demonstrates the political motivations and challenges that often arise from unhappiness, leading her to explore Friedan as the character of the "feminist killjoy." See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 50-51.

In addition to these more sociological critiques, musical commentary emerged from Barber's contemporaries. For example, Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952) shows an average day in the life of suburban couple Dinah and Sam. The opera takes place in a flattened-out world. Bernstein specifies the sets should be "cartoon-like sketches," the first act backdrop a "child's sketch of a dream-house."[36] We see Dinah's dissatisfaction with her life, marked by a morning argument with her husband, a visit to her analyst, and finally a frustrating trip to the movies where she sees the ridiculous love story "Trouble in Tahiti." Meanwhile, Sam struggles with his work and the expectations of upper middle class masculinity. The two reunite after both having missed their son's play because of their internal dramas, "resolving" their argument by settling to go see the film that Dinah had earlier dismissed.

Trouble in Tahiti aesthetically recreates the plastic world of suburban bliss, juxtaposed with Dinah's, and to a lesser extent Sam's, emotional turmoil. The opera switches between the jazzy tunes of a trio of nameless, always smiling singers—"a Greek chorus born of the radio commercial… in the high priced dance band tradition"—and Dinah and Sam's lush, intimate arias.[37] By focusing on the cartoon-like flatness of the post-war home, Bernstein brings Friedan's feminist dissatisfaction to the stage. The sunny suburban home is indifferent to the people that inhabit it, as is the exoticist narrative that is foisted upon Dinah in the film's "Technicolor twaddle." Ultimately for Dinah, the slick new surfaces of the domestic only lead to frustration, failed communication, and bitter submission, with only the occasional aria of hope.[38]

Later queer histories and theory took up these critiques of the domestic while embracing the more politically progressive spaces of urban public life. As queer critics have argued, the

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[36] Leonard Bernstein, *Trouble in Tahiti* (New York: G. Schimer, 1988).
[37] Ibid.
[38] For a more detailed consideration of *Trouble in Tahiti* see Elizabeth L. Keathley, "Postwar Modernity and the Wife's Subjectivity: Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*," *American Music* 23:2 (Summer, 2005): 220-256.

private domestic realm offered little space for queer political action because the home was so deeply entrenched in heteronormative values. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner go so far as to suggest that the entire construction of privacy relies on an inherently heteronormative structure.[39] For the two,

> Heteronormative forms of intimacy are supported… not only by overt referential discourse such as love plots and sentimentality but materially, in marriage and family law, in the architecture of the domestic, in the zoning of work and politics.[40]

A truly progressive queer world must move away from the domestic and its normative trappings of intimacy as subversion and resistance emerges from more public and ephemeral situations that queer sexual practices rely upon.[41] This shift to a more urban environment follows common post-Stonewall narratives, which locate major political queer action in cities like Berlin, Paris, New York and San Francisco, and celebrate their flourishing queer life.[42]

The tendency of queer histories and theorization to favor more urban and politicized queer life has rendered figures like Barber problematic. Despite being unapologetically gay, Barber does not foreshadow the urban utopia of Berlant and Warner's project.[43] In fact, Barber's lifestyle points out two common shortcomings of scholarship privileging the public sphere. First, figures who never fully articulated or represented their homosexuality publicly were dismissed as reactionary and inhibiting gay liberation. Gay men around Barber like Tennessee Williams were described as self-hating or problematic because of their lack of transparent sexual politics in their

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[39] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry* 24:2 (Winter, 1998): 557-566.
[40] Ibid., 562.
[41] For example, they cite the following as representative of this public ephemerality: "drag, youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting and cruising" made possible through mobile sites like "gossip, dance clubs, softball leagues, and phone sex ads." Ibid., 561.
[42] For a discussion and history of post-Stonewall narratives of the 1950s see Corber, *Homosexuality*, 1-5.
[43] Nowhere throughout Barber's biographical material is there indication of a struggle with his sexuality. In fact, when specifically questioned about Barber's being "well adjusted" to his sexuality, John Browning asserts that Barber had no problem with it, but that the composer did abide by common practice of the time and rarely publically commented upon it. Peter Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press), 137.

writings.[44] Second, focusing only on urban spaces led to what Jack Halberstam identifies as a "metronormativity" within queer research, whereby there is a "conflation of 'urban' and 'visible' in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities."[45] Viewing the city as the dominant locale for queer experience has lead to an undertheorization of rural and suburban lives.[46] Due to the very real importance of urban spaces for queer political action, queer history has valorized cities at the expense of figures like Barber and—perhaps more importantly—those without the ability to leave their rural/suburban community.[47]

Recent queer scholarship has begun to respond to these issues. Rather than fostering a singular, progressive public image, scholars are returning to figures like Barber for a richer portrait of historical queer life. Scholars now reconsider spaces and attitudes that have been previously considered oppressive to liberatory queer goals. For example, Sara Ahmed turns to the foundational metaphor of the closet to challenge its straightening effects. She suggests that "if the closeted queer appears straight, then we might have to get into the closet… to reach the point of deviation. While the closet may be seen as a betrayal of queer (by containing what is queer at home) it is just as possible to be queer at home, or even to queer the closet."[48] Getting into the homes of "reactionary" figures like Barber provides details that show how their queerness affects their daily lives. Rather than only looking for public displays or articulations of

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[44] Corber, *Homosexuality,* 20.
[45] Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgendered Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 36.
[46] Recent attempts to remedy this have been put forth by scholars like Karen Tongson and Nadine Hubbs. See Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) and Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014).
[47] I want to stress that I am not trying to equate Barber's privilege and choice to live outside of urban areas with other queer subjects within that area, rather that conventional queer narratives tend to only demonize or erase these spaces as sites for queer potential. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 36.
[48] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 175-6.

sexuality, Ahmed's invitation into the home seeks a more holistic definition of sexuality that recognizes the self-expressions and assertions that queer subjects make within the private sphere.

Beyond this metaphorical home, Sharon Marcus outlines how queer inhabitants can use domestic spaces without merely subjecting themselves to heteronormative logics.[49] She considers features of the domestic that are "not inherently tied to heterosexual structures," such as, aestheticism, interiority, and sentiment.[50] Each of these aspects of domestic life speaks to a wealth of meanings and experiments that happen within the queer home, and by using them as a critical frame, we see how different affective bonds form and flesh out multiple queer adaptations of the domestic's usually normative function. For example, Barber ignores the normative reproductive goals of heterosexual domestic life, substituting aesthetic goals. In addition to his meticulous attention to Capricorn's upkeep, which potentially frames it as an aesthetic object, Barber manages to have an aesthetic use for the home in that it is a space of artistic creation, as stressed by the Horan article. Further, Marcus defines interiority as "the identification of self, couple and family within a home understood as more than a physical space, as an expression of personality, shared tastes, and emotional bonds."[51] Here emotional bonds with the home are part of a larger identifications that focus on internal feelings rather than public display. By exploring these emotional identifications and "getting inside" Barber's home, I aim to see how Barber used and altered the domestic to fashion a productive environment for his compositional and romantic life to flourish.

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[49] This is not to say that Ahmed does not consider the actual home; many of her phenomenological insights are drawn from her own experience of home spaces. For more on the discussion of Ahmed's queer homes and space see the introduction.
[50] Sharon Marcus, "At Home with Other Victorians," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108 (2009): 120-121.
[51] Ibid., 121.

II. At Home with Barber

Barber and Menotti purchased Capricorn in 1943 with the help of longtime patron Mary Zimbalist Bok. A founder of the Curtis Institute where Barber and Menotti first met, Bok had provided funds and lodging to support both of their careers since their student days. Owning Capricorn helped the composers escape the overwhelming, cramped quarters of their New York City apartment, which the two had shared since the early 1940s.[52] The village of Mount Kisco was only an hour away from New York City by car, but offered the young men a rural retreat from the bustling metropolis. Throughout his career Barber expressed his preference for the country, stating near the end of his life, "I think I'm a country person. Most everything I've composed, I've composed in the country, and the pieces I've written in the city have been generally been started in the country."[53] For Barber, Capricorn provided picturesque isolation that inspired him to write, while still being practically close to the city for performances, business, or travel further afield. Throughout his stay, Barber constantly remarked on Capricorn's natural beauty and solitude. In a letter from the late 1940s to his aunt Louise Homer, he enthusiastically writes, "I wish you could look out the window of my studio and see the hemlock woods all covered with snow! Who would ever want to live in N.Y. again!"[54] Even when not at Capricorn, Barber sought refuge away from the city in a variety of guest houses and villas scattered throughout New England and Italy.[55]

Barber's compositional use of Capricorn extended beyond his hermitages. For several pieces that featured soloists, Barber invited musicians to Capricorn for their advice and expertise

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[52] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 64.
[53] Quoted in Heyman, *Samuel Barber,* 241.
[54] Samuel Barber to Louise Homer, 1940, Box 1, Folder 4, Louise Homer Collection 1845-1999, Music Division, Library for the Performing Arts, New York Public Library.
[55] For example between 1954 and 1957 while working on *Vanessa*, Barber found himself summering in Brooklyn, Maine; Positano and Capri, Italy; Nantucket, Massachusetts; and Southampton, Long Island. Heyman, *Samuel Barber,* 380-386.

during the work's composition. This included pianists Vladimir Horowitz and John Browning, vocalists Martina Arroyo and Leontyne Price, and cellist Raya Garbousova. Barber would request to hear their repertoire to learn their technical abilities and personal style, which he would then incorporate into the piece. In 1945, while writing his cello concerto that was commissioned for Garbousova, he had her play through many technical etudes that were mainly known by cellists and eventually asked her to read through freshly composed passages to give immediate feedback.[56] Barbara Heyman states that Barber was chided by friends for yielding to a performer's demands, but this nevertheless became common practice even on works that were not written for a specific performer.[57] For example, Horowitz's influence on the Piano Sonata op. 26 (1949) was immediately noticed by critics when the pianist premiered the work, even though both men claimed that the piece was not written for him.[58] However, Horowitz's frequent presence in Mount Kisco resulted in numerous suggestions as well as general piano lessons for Barber.[59] Welcoming these musicians into his home, Barber blended personal and professional relationships that provided him with a deeper understanding of their personality which translated into the music that he wrote for them. Creating an intimate context for the work's genesis resulted in music that was recognized as idiomatic for the performer while still firmly in Barber's own compositional voice.[60]

In addition to these more rigorous musical interactions, Capricorn hosted many impromptu performances at the numerous parties Barber and Menotti threw. Soon after moving to Mount Kisco, Capricorn was known as a major weekend getaway among an international crowd of artists such as Francis Poulenc, Pierre Bernac, Dmitri Shostakovich, Virgil Thomson,

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[56] Heyman, *Samuel Barber,* 249-250.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 300.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 256-7.

Vladimir Horowitz, Marcel Duchamp, Martha Graham, Paul and Jane Bowles, composer Charles Turner, conductor Thomas Schippers, designer Oliver Smith, Tallulah Bankhead, John Browning, Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, Vivien Leigh, Laurence Olivier, and Andy Warhol. Though there was often a social division between Barber and Menotti's friends, memories of gatherings are warm and amusing for their combination of artistic elite names and everyday antics.[61] Smith recalls a birthday party for Horowitz that ended in a snowbound sleepover with the Bowleses, Gold and Fizdale, and the Horowitzes, which he refers to as the best country party he had ever attended.[62] Barber would regularly sing lieder and Horowitz would play the piano, in addition to the talents of whichever musical guest happened to be present. As Charles Turner remembers, a surefire trick to start a miniature recital was for him to play the opening bars of a piece to only be immediately corrected by Horowitz who would then take over.[63] This domestic social music making shows Capricorn's vitality and its importance in bringing friends and music together within a hospitable and intimate environment. Known for the fun of their parties, Barber and Menotti created a home that emphasized private interactions and close-knit friendships, along with artistic stimulation.

While much of the festive atmosphere of Capricorn showed Barber's convivial side, there were also moments of social withdrawal and finicky attitudes. Barber's at times lemony personality and high standard of upkeep could dampen Menotti's boyish spirits. For example, Oliver Smith describes one time where Barber locked himself in a bathroom for eight hours while Paul Bowles tried to convince Tallulah Bankhead to star in a production of Sartre's *No*

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[61] Gruen, *Menotti*, 55.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 78.

Exit, simply because he did not want to talk to the star.[64] There are further stories of Barber dismissing cooks and maids that were too chatty with the garrulous Menotti, and being incredibly fussy about the house's physical condition.[65] Even Barber's close friend Charles Turner recalls that

> the house had to be in good order at all times. It had to look in good condition too; nothing could be run down. He once came and stayed here with me, and the wallpaper was coming off in the bathroom. He said, "I can't take a bath in bathroom where the wallpapers' coming off." He was that fussy![66]

While still inviting, a home for Barber had to be properly run and maintained for maximum comfort and productivity.

Within the artistic elite Capricorn attracted, an important queer presence thrived because of the home's privacy. The house was purchased because Barber and Menotti were committed to sharing their domestic lives despite the rigor of their careers and the social stigma of men living together. But because of the financial and social security provided by the wealthy and well-connected Mary Zimbalist Bok, the two were able to afford a domestic lifestyle that suited their professional needs as well as their wish to live comfortably as a couple. In fact, the earlier days of their relationship blended their romance with a similarly picturesque isolation. In 1936, Barber and Menotti rented a lakeside cottage for three months in reclusive St. Wolfgang, Austria for a mere $100.[67] Here, they enjoyed privacy amidst the majestic beauty of the Alps, filling their days with composing. During this stay, Barber began his first string quartet (containing the now famous *Adagio for Strings*) while Menotti worked on his first opera *Amelia al ballo*. Within a

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[64] Smith continues that Bankhead was offended by the thought of playing a lesbian part, even though she spent the day chasing Jane Bowles throughout the house. Bankhead and her sister drove off into the snowy night "scratching and pulling at each other's hair" while the rest spent the evening rescuing Barber "from a mood of complete prostration." Gruen, *Menotti*, 53.
[65] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 78.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 149.

single summer, the cottage saw the composition of two works that would launch their respective careers. Barber summarized the summer as "perfect,"[68] while Menotti described it as "one of the happiest times of his life."[69] "Very inaccessible and able to work in peace," Barber and Menotti were able to live their lives together in quiet solitude composing and enjoying each other's company.[70] The solitude and privacy of the lakeside cabin also meant that they could avoid homophobic scrutiny of their lifestyle.

By the time they were able to purchase Capricorn seven years later, the two had demonstrated a long-term commitment to living with one another. Rather than maintaining separate residences and meeting when convenient or most discreet, Barber and Menotti lived openly within a private setting so as to embrace daily life with one another. As a young Barber stated in a joyous letter to his parents while travelling with Menotti, "There is so little to tell now, and so much to feel. Perhaps it is the monotony of our daily life which make me find it so beautiful. At any rate, I am happy. HAPPY!.... All known species of love!"[71] While the nineteen year-old's enthusiasm could just be youthful idealism, Barber recognizes the sheer joy that comes from spending time with one's lover, no matter how mundane it may be. By embracing this monotony, Barber recognizes the importance of the quotidian goings-on usually only seen in cohabitation. Barber and Menotti were fortunate to imbue the everyday with their love because this was not readily available for homosexual men of the time. Bok's patronage meant that the couple was able to own and configure a space to fit the lifestyle they desired instead of succumbing to societal expectations.[72]

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[68] Ibid., 150.
[69] Gruen, *Menotti,* 130.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 69.
[72] John Browning asserts that Barber and Menotti were also protected socially by Bok's high standing within the artistic community. Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 160.

Outside their own relationship, Capricorn hosted several of the couple's other queer friends and lovers. As discussed earlier, Robert Horan depended on Barber and Menotti both financially and emotionally for some time, the couple having found him on the streets of New York looking hungry and disheveled.[73] In his biography of Menotti, John Gruen stresses how Barber and Menotti, as an older gay couple, provided stability and guidance for the at times troubled young poet. Horan was deeply ingrained in the Barber-Menotti relationship having lived at Capricorn. As friend and choreographer John Berthes noted, the trio resembled a type of family.[74] Yet Gruen claims that "the emotional strain of a the three-way relationship and the fascinating but rather high-powered personalities in their social world, made life perhaps not quite so serene as it seemed for a highly nervous and very young man." By the late 1940s, Horan left Capricorn for Europe where he was found by Truman Capote near death.[75] Capote phoned Menotti who was able to come help revive him and send him back to California. Their support resembled that of parents with a child, yet importantly restructured traditional familial bonds by organizing itself around chosen relationships instead of inheritance.

Perhaps more troublesome for Barber was Menotti's relationship with conductor Thomas Schippers, who was a permanent guest at Capricorn during *Vanessa*'s composition. Several interviews with friends of the couple complicate the picture of their monogamy, specifically by disclosing Menotti's sexual preference for younger men.[76] While other relationships were short lived and inconsequential, Schippers, twenty years Menotti and Barber's junior, proved to be a longtime and serious companion for Menotti. The conductor had established himself as a rising star within the music world, having debuted with the Metropolitan Opera at age twenty-three. In

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[73] Gruen, *Menotti*, 58.
[74] Ibid., 48.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered,* 137. Barber was also described by Browning as being occasionally involved with younger men, but never as seriously as Menotti was.

addition, he was a champion of both Barber and Menotti's music, understandably informed by his close relationship with the two. Yet Schippers noted Barber's personal distance, perhaps due to his affair with Menotti. When directly questioned about the relationship between the three men, Schippers asserts that "the fact is none of the relationships are clear, and no one will be able to explain them to anyone…. You'll never get to the bottom of our relationship because *we* haven't."[77] Pianist John Browning, who was a friend of Barber's and premiered his piano concerto, fleshes out the situation stressing that Barber's love for Menotti was "an absolute one-person relationship in very much the way Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten were."[78] He continues that Barber "was truly married to Gian Carlo... I don't think Gian Carlo felt quite the same thing. But I don't think we'll ever know the whole story."[79] While still respecting the intimate nature of what happened, Browning suggests that the Schippers affair led to the end of Menotti's relationship with Barber.[80]

Schippers's and Browning's comments are both enlightening and frustrating, for while they illuminate previously undisclosed information about Barber's sexual relationships, they remain emotionally muddled. Though Barber offered little comment on the situation, a recent discovery by Barbara Heyman provides a brief reflection on the matter during the composition of *Vanessa*. By the summer of 1956, tensions with Menotti and Schippers had reached a peak. Having spent previous summers with Turner, Menotti, and Schippers on the New England coast, Barber was alone working on Acts two and three in Sconset, Nantucket. On the back of one of the manuscript pages for the musical interlude in Act II, Barber had written the following:

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[77] Gruen, *Menotti*, 140-1.
[78] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered,* 137.
[79] Ibid., 139.
[80] Though the two remained friends and communicated through the end of Barber's life, the couple separated sometime in the early 1960s. Eventually Menotti became involved with Francis Phelan, whom he would go on to adopt as his son. Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 465.

> Last night, the slow crashing of the surf, the cry of gulls, and the intermittent circling shaft of white light from the light house, I thought how much we had always wished to have a house just like this one looking out on the sea. All those years together we had wanted such a one and I thought how happy he would be now to be in this place with me. But suddenly I realized not at all. It is not that way any longer. He is happy exactly where he is and precisely with whom he is. That is the way he wishes it to be. It is as clear as that and suddenly there was no more sound from the sea surf, no cries of gulls, and no light from the light house.[81]

At a moment of intense vulnerability Barber reveals his private emotions on what he called "pages from a diary I will never keep."[82] Tied directly to his composition, Barber's reflection illuminates important personal meanings contained within *Vanessa*'s score. While Barber's relationship with Menotti unarguably led to the work's genesis, I want to resist reading the opera only within the context of this moment of loss. As Schippers's and Browning's comments demonstrate, the six year period of *Vanessa'*s composition was marked by emotional confusion and romantic fluctuation. To reduce the opera's meaning to this one devastating moment overly simplifies the complicated network of relationships and emotions that led up to its premiere. Much like accounting for the influence of Barber's sexuality on his music, it better serves us not only to look for discrete iterations of specifically coded meanings, gay or otherwise, but rather to identify the overarching texture that captures the complexity of Barber's life.[83]

For example, throughout Barber's various relationships with other gay figures the domestic remained a constant site of queer encounters. From the wacky antics of the Tallulah Bankhead fiasco to the queer familial bonds with Horan, Capricorn was essential to Barber's expression of social relations. Even at his most bereft, Barber articulates his romantic loss through domestic associations. The Nantucket home triggers Barber to imagine the future

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[81] Barbara Heyman, "Samuel Barber: Serendipitous Discoveries." Lecture, AMS/Library of Congress Lecture Series, Washington D.C. Fall 2012, accessed 15 May 2014, http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=5914.
[82] Ibid.
[83] For further explanation of life texture see the introduction.

happiness he and Menotti could have shared but that is now impossible because of his absence. As his investment in Capricorn and the Nantucket cottage makes clear, Barber valued the way that a home reflected and housed his desires. Barber equates the well-being of his relationships with the stability of these homes showing the interior identification and emotional connections he had with these spaces. At a time when public identifications could not be made, the home offered a location for Barber to turn inward and focus on the intimate relationships that he wanted to participate in. If homosexuality was not admitted in public society, then the home life offered a comfortable, supportive environment where it could flourish. While this withdrawal is potentially isolating, it protected men like Barber from the hostility of a homophobic public.

III. Erika's Queer Interiority

Barber's compositional aesthetic and personality have long been noted for their inward, romantic focus. Menotti sought to capture these qualities in his libretto, stating,

> there was this quest for an ideal love that never seems to have come into Sam's life. The kind of love he would like to have had—love forever, eternal love that never changes. So that's the theme of the opera, this eternal waiting.[84]

Barber is bound to an ideal fantasy of true love, one that renders him out of synch with normal "real world" expectations. His romantically inclined, old-fashioned music matches his overly romanticized dedication to ideal love.[85] Menotti even explicitly framed the opera as a conflict between idealistic interiority and blind fleeting love. In the score of the 1964 revision of the opera Menotti describes *Vanessa* as

> the story of two women, Vanessa and Erika caught in the central dilemma which faces every human being: whether to fight for one's ideals to the point of shutting

[84] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered,* 63.
[85] When prompting Menotti, Dickinson suggestes that this eternal waiting led to a kind of "disillusion" which Menotti denied stating that it was just an "eternal waiting." Ibid.

> oneself off from reality, or compromise with what life has to offer, even lying to oneself for the mere sake of living.[86]

Over the course of the opera we see Vanessa and Erika trade positions. Vanessa at first fully embraces the interior, having shut herself off from the world because of her romantic convictions, while Erika yearns to be outside and in nature.[87] As Vanessa emerges from her isolation and claims her love and place in society, Erika retreats inward, clinging to her ideals.

Christopher Castiglia has explored the connection between interiority and social identity in the context of nineteenth century American Romantic literature. Castiglia argues that during this period, bodily interiors were conceived as a microcosm of American sociality, that a person's inner life was depicted as reflecting values of good citizenship and moral behavior.[88] At a time when interior thoughts were expected to be easily visible through people's appearances and actions, the literary romance focuses on the illegibility of the interior. These works instead present

> the interior *so* deep it becomes unreadable… [opening] up the innovative potential of the unforeseen, the unprecesident, the marvelous. And while these fantastic interiors remain largely isolated in the intense privacy of the romantic interior, they also suggest new social arrangements, romanticism's queer sociality.[89]

He further contends that this queer sociality

> runs counter to and distorts institutionalized sociality and its supplemental interior states, readable and reformable, that have become synonymous with public civility in the United States.[90]

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[86] Samuel Barber, *Vanessa: Opera in Three Acts (Revised Edition)* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1964), IV. Though I quote from the revised score here, I base my interpretations mainly on the original 1958 production of *Vanessa*. For a discussion of the differences between the two see Stefanie Poxon, "From Sketches to Stage: The Genesis of Samuel Barber's *Vanessa,*" PhD dissertation (Catholic University of America, 2005), 56-73.
[87] For a detailed study of the ways that Erika and Vanessa dramatically switch see Rachel Carson Golden, "'As We Were Born Today': Characterization and Transformation in Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*," *Opera Quarterly* 17, (2001) 235-249. For a specific study of their key interactions see Poxon, "From Sketches to Stage," 92-122.
[88] Christopher Castiglia, *Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2-5.
[89] Ibid., 238.
[90] Ibid.

For Castiglia, a romantic interior is so illegible to the outside world that characters, and their bodies, are viewed as odd or bizarre. A subject becomes queer, not by engaging in homosexual acts, but by embracing this isolated fantasy world and challenging normative social expectations.

Within this framework, Erika is a notably queer character. Throughout the opera, Erika's emotional turmoil and confusion go largely unnoticed by the others because of her opaqueness. Referred to as "shy," "curious," and "belonging to another age," Erika strictly adheres to her idealized fantasy of true love which renders her illegible to the other characters, a quality she cultivates through quietly isolating herself in the manor. Within Castiglia's definition, Erika's illegibility at once cuts her off from society and renders her a queer or strange figure. Further, her queerness emerges from her resistance to normative social behavior whereby her notion of love requires no action, but merely an interior to inhabit, a place to sit and wait. Rejecting normative signs of love, a marriage proposal and a child, Erika rebuffs some of the basic social gestures that heterosexuality has to offer. Menotti's description of the opera shows that this idealized love is only possible through a rejection of social reality, which leads to a queer interiority that shuts itself off from the world. While audiences may regard Erika as sad or pathetic for her choices, the domestic interior nurtures her attachments no matter how illogical they may seem. Yet this turn towards interiority is perhaps counterintuitive for an art form that seems so explicitly focused on expression. While the other characters of the opera may be oblivious to her internal states, we as an audience are all too aware of her emotional turmoil. I argue that Barber is able to capture the feeling of queer interiority by aligning us with Erika, showing the drama and potential trauma when one's interior space is threatened.

To understand how Barber musically enacts a sense of queer interiority, I focus on how Erika's internal emotions clash with the public displays of love that Vanessa demonstrates by

first going to church and then holding a ball. In these two scenes, Barber contrasts the inner rhythms of Erika's body with social music making—the church congregation's morning hymn and the various dances played throughout the ball. He juxtaposes the strict and continuous rhythms of the social music with the highly mutable and volatile musical motives of Erika's inner world. Within each scene, the two opposing rhythmic bodies swell in volume and complexity to assert their dominance, which leads to a dramatic climax that ends each respective act. Instead of submitting to these regulating rhythms, Erika rebels and protects her interiority from normative society's conventions. In both cases, Erika chooses to assert her bodily sovereignty first by rejecting Anatol's proposal and later by deciding to abort his child.

The course of Act II focuses on Erika's internal conflict between accepting Anatol's proposal or remaining alone while pregnant. She confesses to her grandmother, who pressures her to accept so that her child is not fatherless and the family's honor is preserved. This emotional insecurity is further complicated when Vanessa tells Erika about her own love for Anatol and his proposal to her. Renewed by Anatol's love, Vanessa reclaims her place in society by attending church. But as everybody leaves for the chapel, Erika stays behind to wrestle with her decision. At this point, Barber inserts a musical interlude where Erika acts out her inner emotions in pantomime. Without any words, Barber captures her interior dialogue through the transformation of three themes.

First there is a six-note motive, initially heard at the beginning of Act II, which supplies the majority of musical material for this sequence (see Example 1.1, Act II, opening measure). While the first act ends in an ethereal blend of strings, harp, and flute, the second act begins with the low, lurching motive that grounds whatever romantic headiness is left over from the prior scene. The motive is repeated throughout the opera whenever Erika struggles with both loving

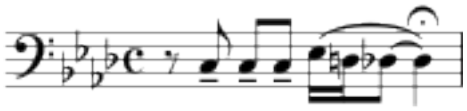
and hating Anatol. After the others exit to a bucolic mix of strings and clarinet, this motive, which I will refer to as the strife motive, is repeated and piles up on itself as Erika is left alone with her thoughts. This layering causes a metrical shift to an off-kilter 5/8, which contains the theme associated with Erika's name and her desire (see Example 1.2a; Rehearsal 76). Barber continues layering the strife motive over the Erika theme as she approaches a mirror that had been covered by Vanessa. As she uncovers it, the Erika motive is dramatically inverted, capturing her youthful reflection amongst the otherwise lifeless living room (see Example 1.2b; Act II, Rehearsal 77).

Seeing herself in the mirror briefly calms Erika as the strife motive gives way to new melodic material. The new theme is a melody that usually appears at the mention of the seductive pleasures of Anatol's love. Though first emerging in full when Vanessa recalls his proposal, the theme occurs in pieces throughout the first act when Erika first meets him. The motive alternates between 3/4 and 2/2, following a simple scale that becomes lost in its rhythmic ambiguity (see Example 1.3; Act II, Rehearsal 37). Once it begins, Erika approaches and unveils a portrait of Vanessa "in a ball dress, in all the pride of her youth." As soon as the portrait is revealed the love music is interrupted by an offstage four-part choir singing their morning hymn in a simple homophonic texture with little harmonic motion. The scene alternates between the pious simplicity of the choir and the writhing strife motive as Erika stares at the portrait. While the choir remains staid and calm, the strife motive is augmented, diminished, layered, and played with greater intensity. Finally Erika

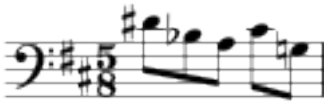
> runs quickly over to the mirror and looks at her reflection, first with morbid fascination as she compares it with the figure in the portrait, then with sudden pride and defiance, as she unbuttons her blouse to imitate the extreme décolletage of Vanessa's dress in the portrait.

Ignoring the final cadence of the hymn, Erika cries out, “No Anatol, my answer is No,” refusing his proposal and leaving him for Vanessa to marry. The strife motive races to a wild frenzy before a forceful g# minor sonority ends the scene.

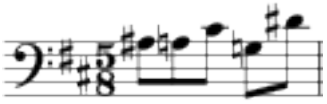
Example 1.1. Strife motive



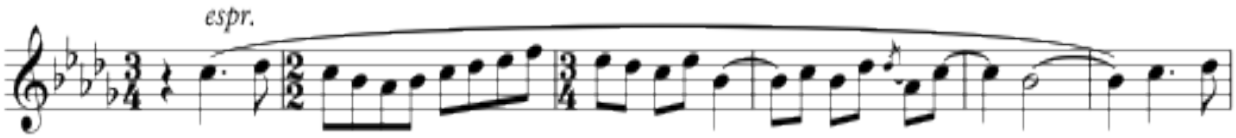
Example 1.2a. Erika’s desire



Example 1.2b. Erika’s desire mirrored



Example 1.3. Love motive



Barber’s score is intensely dramatic despite containing little text or action. Littered with performance instructions like “hysterical,” “anguished,” and “wild,” the music depicts Erika’s inner turmoil in the face of Vanessa’s newfound happiness. By going to the chapel and singing with Anatol at her side, Vanessa demonstrates her arrival in the social world now that her romantic goals have been satisfied. She is the model church-going citizen who participates in heteronormative displays of sociality, rather than some hysterical woman locked away in her gothic manor. Erika, however, has now chosen the latter of these fates. As Barber explores the twisted fluidity of her themes, the religious music of proper sociality is alien and cold in comparison to Erika’s fiery inner passion. All of her themes are rhythmically flexible in their ability to be piled on top of each other (e.g. the strife motive) or are metrically ambiguous (e.g.

love motive). Though the anguish of the strife theme may seem unpleasant in its neurotic spinning out, it is born of the same interiority that fosters the idealized love theme. The manor, now dominated by Erika's interior emotions rather than Vanessa's, allows for these emotional experiences to overflow rather than being forced into the boxy conventionality of the church music. Claiming what was Vanessa's space for her own, Erika embraces the queerness of interiority by choosing the interior realm and ignoring the musical form and style of the hymn, and the societal expectations it represents.

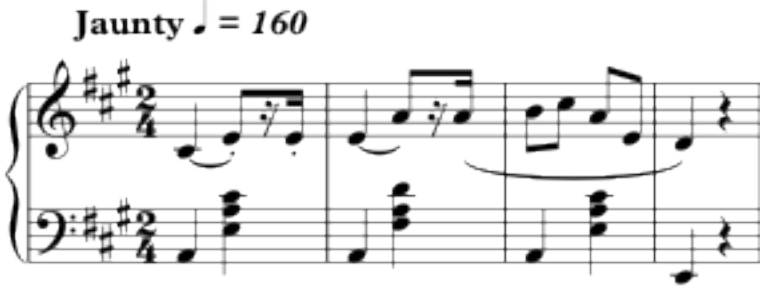
For Act III, Barber recreates this tension between interiority and public on a more global scale. Throughout the New Year's Eve ball Vanessa holds to announce her engagement, Barber manipulates dance motives that permeate the entire act. Here, Barber demonstrates the skill of his dramatic musical planning, showing his Mozartean sense of action and development.[91] The act revolves around the interaction between three different dance themes that have specific class and emotional connotations. First, there is the jaunty 2/4 (6/8) dance that opens the act (see Example 4; Act III, Rehearsal 1). Underlining the evening's pomp and grandeur, this dance leads to the Doctor's intoxicated, jovial aria. Second, there is a 3/4 dance that is performed by the local peasants in celebration of Vanessa's engagement (see Example 5; Act III, Rehearsal 59). Third is a waltz that appears earlier in the opera texted and performed diegetically. Titled "Under the Willow Tree," the song is performed as a set piece in the second act when the Doctor and Vanessa reminisce about the parties the manor used to hold (see Example 6; Act II, Rehearsal 18). The tune is largely triadic and is in a simple AB form.

In addition to the actual waltz song, Barber includes a more allusive and evocative motive that captures the waltz feel without replicating the tune of "Under the Willow Tree." The

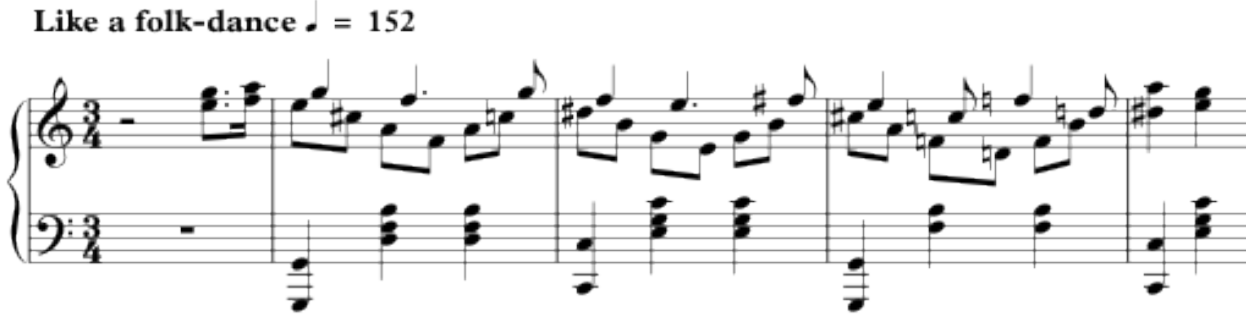
[91] Heyman, *Samuel Barber,* 245.

waltz motive (see Example 7; Act II, Rehearsal 16) contains a more elegant, chromatic line that suggests a regal interpretation of the dance, a glowing memory rather than an antiquated song. This is emphasized by the fact that it appears before the actual waltz when Vanessa first mentions the idea of having a ball. The motive is also associated with Vanessa's engagement. When Vanessa tells Erika about Anatol's proposal the waltz motive is played after the love motive, with Vanessa singing "he took my hand" in perfect unison with the orchestra. Because of this, I stress the waltz motive's association with Vanessa's marriage plans and the action of accepting Anatol's love. Rather than a purely idealized love, the waltz theme combines the sentimental associations of love with the social aspect of the dance, resulting in a public display of love for others to see. The link between dance topics, love, and sociality is further cemented when Vanessa not only holds a ball to announce her engagement but also has a group of peasants perform a dance immediately after the engagement is announced.

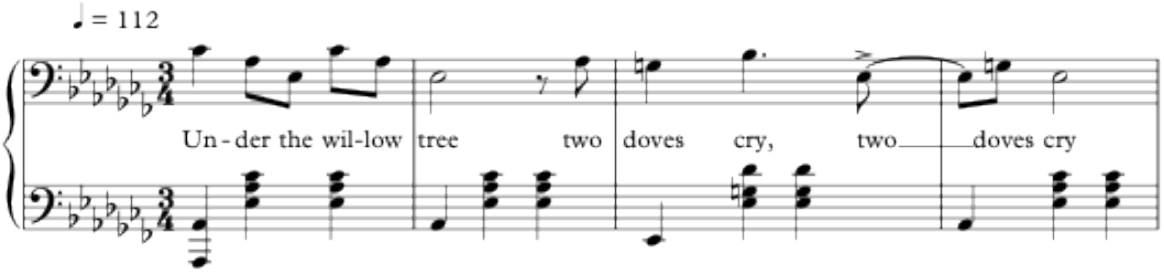
Example 1.4. Jaunty dance



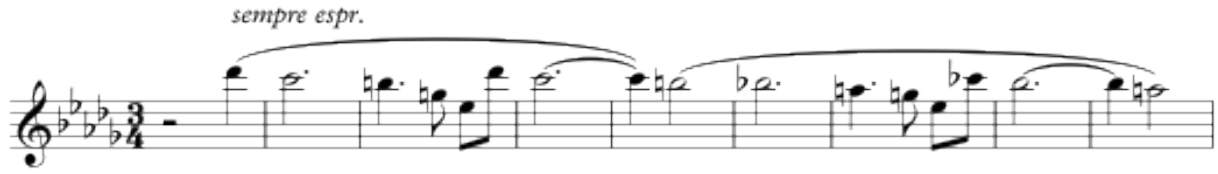
Example 1.5. Peasant dance



Example 1.6. Opening of "Under the Willow Tree"



Example 1.7. Nostalgic waltz motive



With these motives, Barber creates the dramatic climax of the opera. While the ball is in full swing, Vanessa is at first distraught that Erika and the Baroness will not come downstairs for the announcement. Anatol convinces her that she simply needs to forget about her past and embrace her future life with him.[92] They sing a love duet and she is easily convinced. Vanessa decides to go on without them and instructs the Doctor to make the announcement. As they leave the main room, Erika appears at the top of the staircase, pale and sickly. Here, Barber has the onstage orchestra play the jaunty 2/4 dance against the main orchestra's rendition of "Under the Willow Tree." The result is a brief Ivesian dizziness that ends when the Doctor begins to announce the engagement. Stopped midway down the staircase, Erika is instructed to "look as if she has taken very ill, clutching her stomach," fainting when the Doctor actually announces the engagement. Drowning out the Doctor, the anguished orchestra erupts with the nostalgic waltz motive over the strife motive that permeated the climax of Act II. This then gives way to the same awkward 5/8 iteration of the inverted Erika theme as she reels from hearing the

[92] For a more detailed discussion of this duet, refer to chapter 2.

engagement. The chorus then sings "Under the Willow Tree," as the Major Domo goes to help Erika. She dismisses him, preferring to be alone and specifying that he is to tell nobody of what happened.

Once Erika is alone, the peasant dance moves to the orchestra in a raucous orchestration and fraught harmonic language. Erika speaks, "His child…. his child… must not be born…" punctuated by increasingly dramatic interruptions of "Under the Willow Tree." However after "must not be born" the song ends with a defeated trumpet, giving way to the strife motive, which achieves resolution. Erika exits the castle to abort her child, as her grandmother impotently calls after her only to be drowned out by the sounds of the party and the dance music. Barber stresses the trauma of this decision by altering the dance music to appear grotesque, alien, and even violent once Erika has decided to abort her child. Here, the orchestration switches to macabre sounds of dissonant accordions and spiky violins accented by a xylophone. The peasantry is sonically depicted as menacing and threateningly other to Erika's timbrally smooth world. Altering the orchestration and coloring the dance music, Barber paints public romance in a lurid light, one that is completely unsympathetic to Erika's inner sufferings.

In this scene we both see and hear the attack on Erika's interior self. While Erika is physically weak and sick, the dance music seems to override her intense emotional privacy, favoring the world of pompous display. The coercive physicality of the dance music further highlights Erika's struggle to resist social interactions. In short, Erika rejects the physical demands that contradict her emotional ideals by aborting Anatol's child. Stephanie Poxon has discussed the social stigma attached to Erika's choice, suggesting that Barber and Menotti obscured the abortion in the 1962 revision to make her a more sympathetic character to

audiences.[93] Poxon's work reminds us of the extreme social stigma attached to abortion during the 1950s, highlighting the severity of Erika's decision. Rather than going through the physical motions and performing the gestures that signify love (dancing, having a baby), Erika chooses to uphold her interiority by reclaiming it and ridding it of the expectations thrust upon it, retreating deeper into her queer interiority.

Erika's turn towards the interior illuminates the importance the domestic holds for those who cannot fully live out their desires. While Erika was able to retreat to her home, Barber's domestic sanctuary was compromised following his eventual break up with Menotti. Spending most of his time abroad or in an apartment in the city, Menotti insisted on selling Capricorn for financial reasons, eventually setting up home in a Scottish castle with his adopted son and lover Chip Menotti (James Phelan).[94] Menotti and Barber did remain close and occasionally collaborated after *Vanessa*, but their relationship never fully recovered and the property was finally sold in 1973 with Barber's reluctant approval. Now living in the city, the remainder of Barber's years were marked by emotional instability, alcoholism, and depression. His friends, his biographer, and even Menotti himself all state that Barber never fully recovered from the trauma of losing his house.[95]

The feelings and emotional bonds between Barber, Erika, and their respective sanctuaries embody an important aspect of pre-Stonewall homosexual life, one that looks to the more global effects that sexuality has on lived experience. Barber expresses these highly emotional attachments in a sentimentalized style marked by poetic beauty and evocative language. The imagery and drama of the Nantucket confession opens up a further set of questions regarding

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[93] Stephanie Poxon, "'His Child… Must Not Be Born': Revising Erika in Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*." *Opera Journal* 34, no. 4 (2005): 30-32.
[94] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 487.
[95] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 488. Gruen, *Menotti*, 230-232. Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered,* 178, 193.

how Barber's mode of expression can also be informed by his sexuality. If the emotional connections between a subject and their private domestic environment allow for queer meanings to emerge, then how does queerness inform the style and mode in which these feelings are presented?

Chapter 2

Vanessa's Queer Sentiments

In her 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag makes one of the few references to *Vanessa* within critical thought. Writing the same year as the Metropolitan Opera produced a heavily revised version of the opera, Sontag mentions *Vanessa* in passing to distinguish the difference between naive and deliberate camp.[96] Specifically addressing opera's camp potential, Sontag suggests that

> It seems unlikely that much of traditional opera repertoire could be satisfying Camp if the melodramatic absurdities of more opera plots had not been taken seriously by their composers. One doesn't need to know the artists' private intentions. The work tells all.[97]

She continues, "compare a typical 19th century opera work with Barber's *Vanessa*, a piece of manufactured, calculated Camp, and the difference is clear."[98] Stating that "deliberate" camp is "usually less satisfying" and that "probably, intending to be campy is harmful," Sontag implies that *Vanessa*'s fails as camp because of Barber and Menotti's overly knowing intentions.[99]

A catalogue of cultural objects and references, "Notes on Camp" examines the connection between a Wildean aesthete sensibility and contemporary gay cultural practice. By focusing on the purely aesthetic, Sontag aims to celebrate a queered, alternative value system that "incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy."[100] *Vanessa* definitely engages with aesthete styling thanks to Cecil Beaton and his

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[96] For more on the differences between Barber's original and revised productions of *Vanessa* see Stephanie Poxon, "From Sketches to Stage: The Genesis of Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*" (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 2005).
[97] Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 282.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 281
[100] Ibid., 275.

meticulous detail, and focusing on the opera's production aesthetics could offer a useful framework by which to consider the opera's queer sensibility. Yet, I challenge one of Sontag's basic assumptions. For her, *Vanessa* lacks the emotional conviction that its operatic predecessors possess; Barber does not take the "melodramatic absurdities" of the opera's plot seriously. By dismissing Barber's intentions as calculated or ironic, Sontag ignores more serious or genuine understandings of *Vanessa*'s emotional content. Labeling *Vanessa* as unsuccessful camp forces Sontag to hollow out the opera's sentimental force in favor of an assumed queer irony. While I believe Sontag's notes to be an important early theorization of camp as queer cultural practice, I dismiss her understanding of *Vanessa*, and instead demonstrate how accepting the opera's emotionality as authentic can foster an alternative understanding of *Vanessa*'s queer potential.[101]

I. Melodrama at the Met

To begin, Sontag places the camp value of opera in its "melodramatic absurdities." While she relies on melodrama's connotations of insincerity or falseness, the term (French for music-theater) originates from a style of seventeenth-century drama that was novel for its combination of moralistic plots with non-verbal cues, such as music, physical gesture, and *mise-en-scene*.[102] These elements were used to heighten emotional expression in order to create a deeper impact on an audience member. As Christine Gledhill notes, the melodramatic style attempts to capture "larger than life" feelings by relying on gesture and metaphor to signal excess, such as in the use of non-diegetic music or extremely stylized vocal deliverance to denote severe or heightened

[101] For further critique of Sontag's work and alternative definitions of camp, see Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
[102] Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 14-22.

emotional states.[103] Though originally limited to theater, these elements became foundational for nineteenth century opera practice. Yet within the context of mid-century America nineteenth century opera's emotional, stylistic, and gestural excess were read as inaunthentic for critics like Sontag.

At a time when many composers had eschewed nineteenth century dramatic conventions in favor of more austere aesthetics, Barber still embraces this Romantic excess. First, there is the overall heightened quality of Barber's gestural language throughout *Vanessa*. The first bars of the opera reveal a flair for harmonically unstable and melodically pungent motives. Marked "fiery," the opening gesture begins with a lurching figure in the low brass that outlines a tritone ending on f# (See Example 1, Act 1, opening measure). This is then accented with a cymbal crash and a highly dissonant sonority. Next, the high strings execute a soaring leap made of a minor sixth followed by descending thirds, which comes crashing down through the registeral depths of the orchestra to end once again on an f#. Within five bars, Barber is able to race from the lowest register of the orchestra to nearly its highest only to fall again, demonstrating the full range he has at his disposal. In addition, the force and ambiguity of his harmonic language showcases the music's emotional instability, intensified by the diminution of motives (such as the descending thirds moving from eighth notes to sixteenth notes). The exaggerated gestural language—quickly shifting register, speed, and harmony—appropriately prepares the audience for the high drama to come.

In addition, though operatic singing already relies on a highly stylized form of performance, Barber punctuates certain moments with vocal virtuosity to invoke the heights of

[103] For discussions of musical diegesis in reference to melodrama and the women's picture see Heather Laing, *The Gendered Score: Music in 1940s Melodrama and Woman's Film* (Aldershot, Hampshire England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007) and Peter Franklin, *Seeing through Music: Gender and Modernism in Classic Hollywood Film Scores* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Vanessa's emotionality. In fact, the placement and context of these moments demonstrates that even the characters are aware of these rhetorical skills. Take for example the reading scene in the first act. To distract her aunt from worrying about Anatol's impending arrival, Erika offers to read aloud to her. Choosing a scene from *Oedipus*, she sits down and steadily recites the text with simple melodic contour (see Example 2.2a, Act I, Rehearsal 11). Accompanied by strings, flute, and oboe, her rendition stays comfortably within a single octave and is set mostly syllabically. The relatively staid reading is in line with less dramatic forms of singing such as the lied.[104]

Vanessa suddenly "snatches the book away" and states, "you do not know how to read. You do not know what love is." She then repeats the same passage, dramatically embellishing Erika's attempt. Spanning nearly two octaves, Vanessa's version includes dramatic dynamic and tempo manipulation, difficult passagework, and long high notes to more emphatically perform the text (See Example 2.2b, Act I, Rehearsal 12). Also, her rendition is four measures longer than Erika's and is accompanied by a more expansive orchestration, with many of the countermelodies doubled at the octave. Barber demonstrates the rhetorical effectiveness of this theatrical style and shows Vanessa's ability to map her own sufferings onto the role she is playing. As David Halperin suggests, melodrama is a (failed) attempt to raise the bourgeois family to the level of tragedy and by aligning her romantic suffering with that of the fallen Greek hero, Vanessa seeks to raise her emotional crisis to a level of cosmic proportion.[105]

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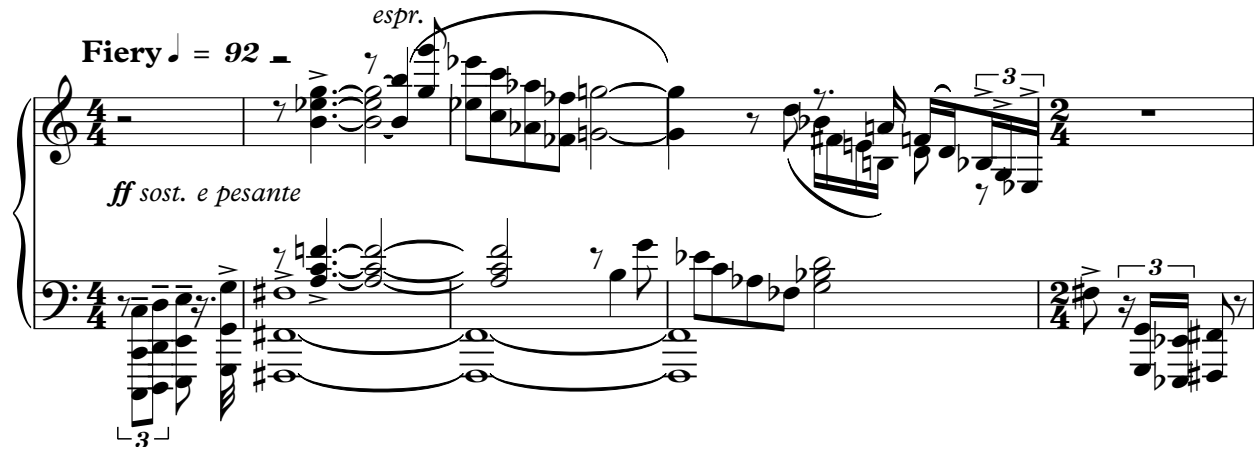
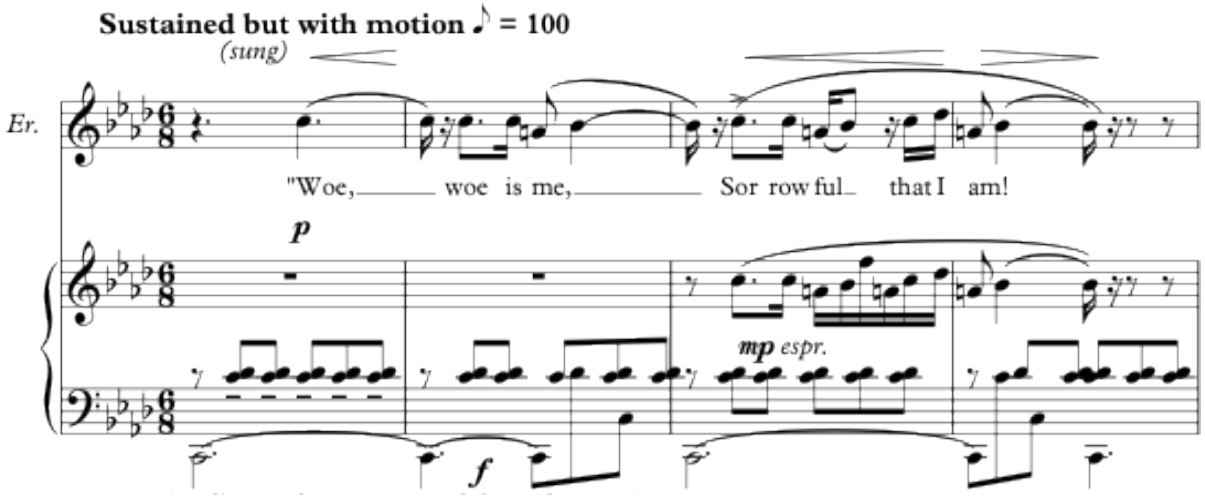
[104] In fact one recent production by the Frankfurt Opera in 2012 shows Erika accompanying herself at the piano underlying the domestic quality of the passage. "VANESSA Oper Frankfurt," YouTube video, 5:48, posted by "Opernfrankfurt," September 11, 2012, http://youtu.be/lRnbpc-y0Ks

[105] David Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 278-281.

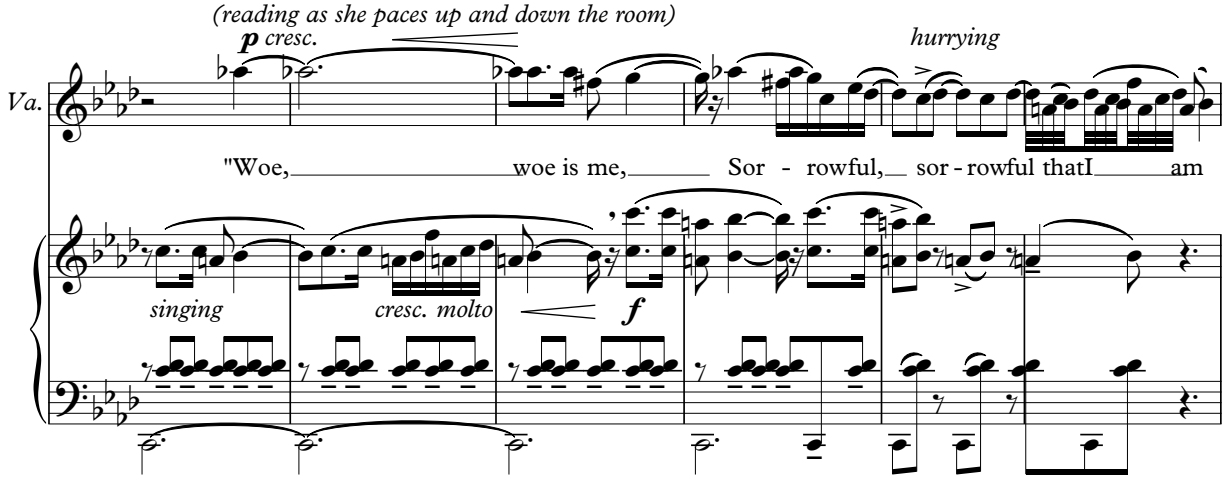
Example 2.1. Opening gestures



Example 2.2a. Erika's reading of Oedipus



Example 2.2b. Vanessa's reading of Oedipus



Is this performance the calculated deliberateness that Sontag is referring to? While she embraces the excess of nineteenth century opera within its own context, what seems to make *Vanessa*'s melodramatic inclinations inauthentic for Sontag is historical location. Whereas the "naïveté" of nineteenth century composers allows for their work to be taken seriously, Barber's historical and cultural location bars him from being naive. He is removed from the style's original cultural relevance, as well as its romantic content, because he is living in a time that does not aesthetically value the melodramatic style of performance in the same way. For Sontag, Barber's use of such outmoded forms of expression means it must be an act of ironic, self-conscious camp because he should not be able to take melodrama seriously. However, Sontag's assumption runs counter to the large audiences of melodrama devotees who valued this aesthetic in films of the time.

Film scholarship has noted a group of films from the 1940s and 50s that used similar emotional rhetoric to earlier melodramatic forms while exploring feminine and domestic subjects.[106] Thomas Schatz, for example, outlines several tropes that emerged in family melodramas of this period. These included: "i. The intruder-redeemer figure, ii. The search for the ideal husband/lover…, iii. Household as focus of social interaction, iv. The ambiguous function of marriage (as simultaneously sexually liberating and socially restricting)."[107] These plots and themes were presented with heightened stylizations and metaphorical allusions through *mise en scene*, music, and movement. Little effort is needed to see how these plot features appear within *Vanessa*. Anatol is called an outright intruder by the Baroness. Both Erika and Vanessa are heard searching for their ideal lover; one choosing to settle while the other remains idealistic.

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[106] John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London and New York: Wallflower, 2004), 4-8.
[107] Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981). Schatz's positions are summarized in Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama,* 9-11.

As discussed in the previous chapter, not only is the entirety of the action contained within the domestic sphere, the home also plays an important thematic role. And marriage is shown as hollow for Vanessa and unnecessary for sexual interaction for Erika. The list of tropes can be further expanded to include an aristocratic setting, presence of a patriarchal medical figure, generational conflict, and scandalous subjects, all of which found within the opera.[108]

More specifically, *Vanessa* follows what Lauren Berlant identifies as the typical "love plot" that was circulated throughout family melodramas and women's films. She states,

> The modern love plot requires that, if you are a woman, you must at least *entertain* belief in love's capacity both to rescue you from your life and to give you a new one, a fantasy that romantic love's narratives constantly invest with beauty and utopian power.[109]

Following Berlant's framework, Vanessa's life is solely focused on reestablishing her love with her long lost Anatol. Act I demonstrates her emotional investment in making his arrival perfect in order to reignite her romantic relationship. Neurotically interrupting with fiery outbursts, Vanessa disrupts the staid rhythm of the opening scene because of the immense pressure she feels to stage the scene correctly. Further, Berlant describes the emotional processes and actions that are needed in order to partake in the love plot. She states that lovers primarily

> learn to aspire to forget the stories they already know about the self-amputation, vulnerability, and social coercion so frequently and so intimately linked with what love's institutions identify as mature happiness.[110]

As she accepts the younger Anatol, Vanessa looks past the overwhelmingly problematic nature of their relationship and its effects on those around her. Vanessa is blind to the fact that her niece is pregnant and dealing with emotional turmoil regarding her seducer, and ignorant of the looming Oedipal overtones of falling for her former lover's son. This is to say nothing of her

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[108] For a discussion of other melodramatic tropes see Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 10-14.
[109] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 171.
[110] Ibid., 169.

ability to forget her own sacrifices that she so clearly remembers and articulates in the confrontation scene. Once Anatol proposes to her, her past pain and suffering seems to be completely forgotten.

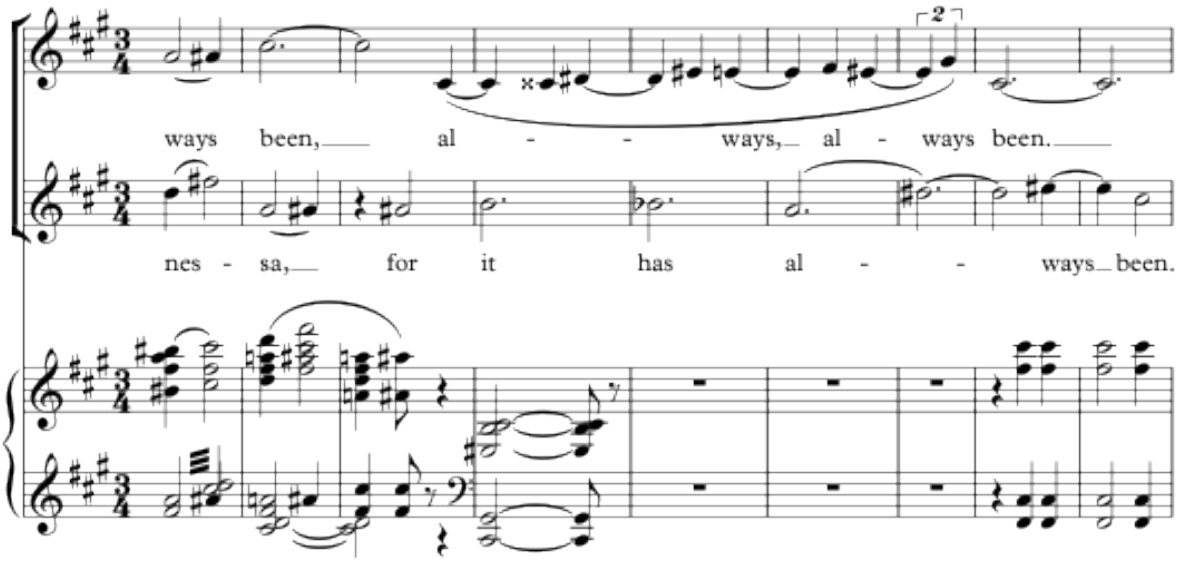
Barber even explicitly demonstrates the importance of forgetting in the few occasions where Vanessa does express doubts. When Erika and the Baroness refuse to come to the engagement announcement in Act III, Vanessa expresses concern. Anatol responds by singing, "Love has a bitter core," and then tells Vanessa not to remember her own past suffering, because "he who hungers for the past will be fed on lies," and that she should "let [her] love be new as were we born today." These words are so convincing for Vanessa that she simply repeats them, adding that she wants to "taste the bitterness" with Anatol. Vanessa goes so far as to say that her love could "neither grow nor die because it has always been," affirming the timeless, utopic love between them. Vanessa is thus blinded and left without memory of her past life and the house she lives in all from just hearing Anatol's voice.

Musically, Barber sets this as an impassioned duet. Anatol starts with a simple melody in f# minor.[111] He sings over a harp ostinato, rising and falling as he tells Vanessa that his love for her has just truly begun. Vanessa then repeats the same music, with only slightly altered by minor rhythmic variations to fit her text. Vanessa is eventually joined by Anatol, who sings a countermelody as the first section builds to a climax. Here, the two enter into contrapuntal imitation offset by one bar, which gives way to a set of tight, rich suspensions as they both move towards the new goal of F# major (Example 3a, Act III, Reheasal 33). The two end on the fifth, C#, an octave apart with Vanessa reaching the final note first and Anatol resolving after. After a B section, Barber repeats this same contrapuntal motion to finish the duet. The second time

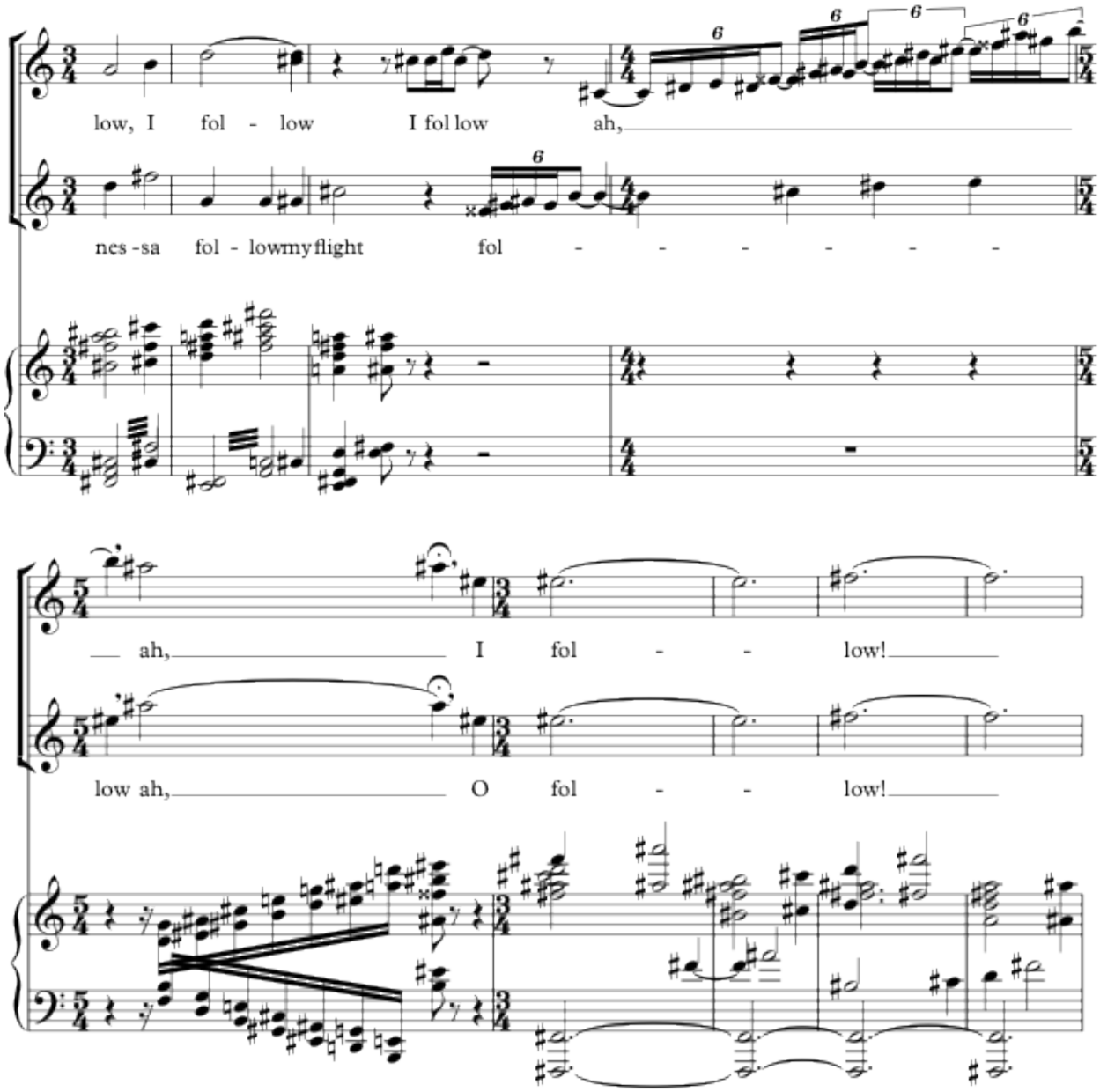
[111] For more on key relations and distributions see Poxon, "From Sketches to Stage," 92-100.

through he includes more florid elaboration and has the voices resolve to a unison F# (Example 3b, Act III, Rehearsal 37). This move from f# minor to F# major is thematically important, as it is the same harmonic motion that Vanessa makes in her confrontation aria. In Act I once Vanessa has finally asked Anatol if he shall love her, she resolves to F# major, which is immediately thwarted as she realizes he is not the real Anatol. Now that she has forgotten her pain and fully accepted her new love, they are able to fully establish F# major amongst soaring strings and an appropriately climactic cymbal crash. Through the transition from f# minor to F# major, the seductively close counterpoint, and the vocal unification, Barber shows that Vanessa surrenders to her new love, completely forgetting about her mother and Erika's disapproval as she leaves to announce her engagement.

Example 2.3a. Ending to A section



Example 2.3b. Elaboration on A' ending



The sensual pleasure and pyrotechnics of the duet demonstrate how easy and enjoyable it can be to forget. Far from the bitter, hermetic world of the first act, Vanessa falls for the warm comfort of Anatol's voice in order to undo the years of misery. Though we know the complexity and hollowness of this seduction, it is hard not to be moved by the sentimental force of Barber's counterpoint. Hearing the two voices merge into one glorious triumph of love rehearses one of

the oldest tricks in grand opera. By fully embracing the tropes of the genre, Barber creates an emotional and sonic satisfaction where love is able to blind sense and reason. In doing so, he is able to tap into melodrama's power to effectively cultivate emotion and tragic situations that emerge within the familial domestic settling. Always played in the highest emotional register and to the widest audience, melodrama relies on making the deepest connections it can with an audience in order to engage them in the love plot. By embracing this style, Barber taps into the cathartic pleasure that comes with feeling, whether it is purely delusional or earnest in its intentions.

II. Detesting Cheap Sentiment: Modernists and the Middlebrow

Critical reception of *Vanessa* contains both high praise and bitter condemnation of its melodramatic subject and style. One particularly vitriolic attack by Stanley Kauffman directly ties Barber to film melodrama by referring to *Vanessa*'s music as a "MGM soundtrack score."[112] For Kauffman, this merely demonstrates Barber's "unremarkable operatic talent," calling him a "composer of pseudo-music."[113] At the same time conductor Dmitri Mitroupolous celebrated Barber's emotional appeal, stating that "the whole texture of *Vanessa* is highly theatrical and dramatic, full of orchestral surprises and climaxes, but always at service of the stage, as any real opera should be."[114] Despite their opposite positions, both reviews comment on the intensity of Barber's sentimentality. The difference, however, emerges in whether or not audiences find this emotional intensity authentic or appealing. By calling Barber a "pseudo-composer," Kauffman's review articulates a larger suspicion of emotion, as well as other nefarious intentions. I suggest

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[112] Quoted in B.H. Haggin, "Rudolf Bing's Metropolitan," *The Hudson Review*, 20 (Spring, 1967): 81.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Quoted in Barbara Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 386.

that by investigating the larger cultural politics behind these reviews, we can understand how criticisms of Barber's "problematically" melodramatic and emotional style are part of larger homophobic discourse within the 1950s American artistic community.[115]

Overall, the initial reception was positive from audience and critics, many of whom claimed that *Vanessa* was the greatest achievement in American opera to date.[116] Paul Henry Lang's review noted the enthusiastic reaction from an audience that "thundered its approbation as the final curtain fell."[117] He continued, "Barber's mastery of operatic language is remarkable and second to none of the Salzburg-Milan axis."[118] Howard Taubman discussed how Barber's skill as a musical dramatist grew as the opera progressed, focusing on the strength of his musical line and treatment of the scenario.[119] Writing for the *New Yorker*, Winthrop Sargeant claimed that it was a major feat for modern opera, matching the works of "Richard Strauss's more vigorous days."[120]

Along with these more enthusiastic reviews, some critics expressed outright disappointment and condemnation. In a brutal assessment, Robert Evett viewed *Vanessa* as representative of American opera's continued failure. Evett's frustration stemmed from "having expected too much," feeling that "the fatal weakness is in the score itself. For Barber has repressed his own stylistic individuality and instead favored an imitation of Menotti's musical

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[115] This argument could be expanded to include an international audience as *Vanessa* was produced at the 1958 Salzburg festival, where it was the first opera ever to be sung in English. However, this falls outside the scope of the project at hand. For more on *Vanessa*'s failure at the Salzburg Festival, see Heyman, *Samuel Barber,* 394-397.
[116] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 392.
[117] Ibid., This claim is further supported by a recording of a live performance during which contains the audience's enthusiastic applause at the end of each act as well as after several of the set pieces. Samuel Barber, *Historical Recordings 1935-1960* West Hill Radio Archives, WHRA 6039, 2011, compact disc.
[118] Heyman, *Samuel Barber,* 392.
[119] Quoted in Heyman, 393.
[120] Winthrop Sargeant, "Musical Events," *New Yorker*, January 15, 1958, 109.

mannerism… [the] piece has a spurious ring to it."[121] Evett further claims that Barber's past compositional rigor falls victim to Menotti's weak characterization:

> Menotti makes his characters—especially his women—more foolish than is absolutely necessary. Perhaps it is because he tries so consistently to plumb the psychological depths of their empty heads. He is forever giving them modern sex problems and big ideals that somehow never manage to come clear.[122]

Evett believes that with such little substance to work with, Barber "ought to throw out the whole opera and use the raw materials for a farce."[123] Here, Barber is victim to the overly emotional and psychologically vapid issues presented in Menotti's libretto, and shown as tragically overpowered by the melodramatically inclined European.

Writing for the *Sunday Review*, Kolodin is equally critical of Menotti, though much more forgiving of Barber's score. He argues "what Menotti provided Barber to work with has, in this view, more than a little effect on the end product… the libretto… is both contrived and insubstantial."[124] He continues, "on a technical level, Menotti's libretto is resourceful and recurrently marked by singable lines and scenes… but it puts an enormous burden on the composer's ability to involve the listener by the sheer power of his music."[125] Menotti's clumsy language compromises the dramatic intensity of the situations; only Barber's musical prowess overcomes the shallow, though technically proficient libretto.[126] Kolodin's language and focus on the shortcomings of Menotti's libretto rehearse common critiques of melodrama: a dissatisfaction of the with an overindulgence in gesture and metaphor.

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[121] Robert Evett, "Yankee Doodling at the Met," *New Republic*, January 27, 1958, 18.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Irving Kolodin, "Barber, Menotti, and 'Vanessa,'" *Saturday Review*, January 18, 1959, 41.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Kolodin points to the climax of the opera where Erika says "His child, his child, it must not be born." Kolodin quips, "Certainly there are, in the whole gamut of the English language, seven better words to express that intent than the ones Menotti has chosen." Ibid.

In these negative reviews two themes emerge. First, there is the looming anxiety over Barber's position as a composer of "American" opera. During a time of American political and economic expansion within the global arena, music was an important area to further assert the nation's alleged cultural supremacy.[127] For many, *Vanessa'*s success or failure could then be seen as representative of American arts at large, the work's values and aesthetics representing America on an international opera stage (the Salzburg-Milan axis, as it were). For detractors like Evett and Kolodin, *Vanessa*'s failure was its unabashed emotionality and accessibility that ran counter to the intellectual rigor or aesthetic virility that some critics viewed as the future American sound. Because of its "cheap" emotional appeal, for Evett, *"Vanessa* [was] destined to be kept from being a "long term success."[128] In other words, *Vanessa*'s popularity revealed its inauthenticity, making it a precarious base for American operatic development.

Second, both critics cite Menotti as a problematic influence on Barber's previously fine compositional ability, perhaps alluding to both their musical and personal relationship. At the time Menotti was known as a composer of popular operas, noted for their charm and accessibility.[129] *The Medium* (1946) and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) were both well received by American audiences and established Menotti as a leading composer of English language opera. In catering to different audiences (e.g., Broadway) and new technologies (e.g., television), Menotti was criticized by intellectuals who sought to preserve opera's elitism within American culture.

Spending too much time depicting reactions rather than actions themselves (e.g., placing Vanessa's initial romance with Anatol and the abortion offstage), the libretto fails to provide a

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[127] Michael Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 4-5.
[128] Evett's review stresses how after the initial success, *Vanessa* was destined to fade away because of its inconsequential subject; its appeal was merely fleeting. Evett, "Yankee Doodling," 19.
[129] John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 79-80.

properly developed scenario to engage either critic. Menotti's choice to focus on the reaction to these traumatic or joyous events again appeals to a more melodramatic sensibility which focuses on emotional development. In fact, Menotti had been briefly employed as a scriptwriter in Hollywood in 1950. After the success of *The Medium*, MGM agreed to Menotti's "fabulous conditions" and bought the rights to the opera as well as asking Menotti for more scripts.[130] Though his scripts were ultimately rejected for their macabre endings, Menotti nevertheless was exposed to a studio that specialized in producing melodramas. This time in Hollywood would have given him an insider's perspective on how scripts and plots were developed and marketed to audiences. As Stephanie Poxon has argued, Menotti's time in Hollywood informed his later revision that substituted Erika's abortion with a suicide attempt.[131] His knowledge of contemporary film culture may have offered a source of melodramatic inspiration for him to take to Barber.

Without explicitly citing their homosexual relationship, Evett and Kolodin use coded language to shown the American Barber as corrupted by his lover. The constant critique of Menotti's vapid and spurious work taps into common language used in reference to gay artists, where aesthetic criticism substituted as an attack on the artists' sexuality. As Michael Sherry has discussed, gay American artists of the 1950s and 60s were particularly scrutinized because of nationalist cultural projects. Sherry describes the awkward position of composers like Barber:

> Out of national pride, aspirations for cultural empire, and fears of enemy advances, Americans showcased artists as emblems of the nation's freedom and muscular culture…. Often out of the same fears, many Americans denigrated or exaggerated gay creative figures… That tension between dependence and

[130] Menotti discusses being hired by Arthur Freed and how he was treated "like a king" upon his arrival in Hollywood. During his time he met stars like Elizabeth Taylor, Marlene Dietrich, Charlie Chaplin, Judy Garland, and Christopher Isherwood. Gruen, *Menotti*, 76.
[131] Poxon, "From Sketches to Stage," 83-88.

> revulsion structured the homintern discourse and nourished its splenetic and contradictory qualities.[132]

The "homintern" discourse, a play on the shorthand for the (supposedly) equal threat of the Communist International (Comintern), posited that America's culture was being run by homosexuals who would cause the moral failure of the nation through their control of the arts. Gay artists were repeatedly criticized for their psychological and creative inauthenticity, characterized as misogynistic aesthetes who were more fit for "embroidering" than actual artistic creation.[133] Sherry's work points out the inherent homophobia of critics like Evett. By focusing on the emotional inauthenticity of the libretto and blaming Menotti and his "foolish women," Evett paints Barber as the innocent American corrupted by the effeminate, misogynistic European; a proud American emasculated by the false mannerisms of the Italian.

Beyond specific criticism of Barber and Menotti, this homintern discourse was a part of a broader shift across the arts to a heavily masculinized modernism during the 1950s and early 1960s. For example, Gavin Butt has noted the popularization of abstract expressionism in the visual arts, with critics celebrating the virility and action of Jackson Pollock's work.[134] In music, high modernism dominated as a continuation of the serialist techniques of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School at places like the Darmstadt summer classes and Princeton. Especially within the American academy, serialism was celebrated for its difficulty and scientistic qualities, which combated the feminization of culture that men like Charles Ives had warned of.[135] Nadine Hubbs has documented and examined the effect of this masculinized discourse on the "queer tonalists" during the time, reparatively evaluating queer American composers like Copland,

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[132] Sherry, *Gay Artists*, 2.
[133] Ibid., 6.
[134] Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), xxx.
[135]Ibid., 71-79.

Thomson, and Rorem.[136] Though they faced similar criticism, Hubbs refrains from discussing Barber and Menotti in-depth because of their aesthetic differences from the Thomson-Copland circle. While Hubbs does acknowledge Barber as a fellow gay tonalist, his alliance to more Germanic and Italianate styles runs counter to her more French definition of midcentury queer musical aesthetics.[137] Emerging from studies with Nadia Boulanger, Thomson and Copland showed a creative interest in techniques of abstraction that were more in line with modernist Stravinskian sensibilities.

Further, Hubbs argues that Thomson was able to encode queer meaning and "tender emotions" within this more austere and lean music, thus able to depict alternative forms of love within his works. Despite this similarity to Barber these men continued to rely on commonly homophobic rhetoric when celebrating abstraction and austerity over the Romantic emotional appeal of Barber's work.[138] In the 1940s when reviewing Barber's *Medea* Suite, one of the composer's more tonally adventurous and stylistically aggressive works, Thomson claimed that Barber was finally

> freed at last from the well-bred attitudizing and mincing respectabilities of his concert manner… Once more the theater has made a man out of an American composer who has passed his earlier years as a genteel musical essayist. The public at large will, from now on, be aware of his real power… It brings its author suspiciously close to the clear status of a master.[139]

Linking Barber's "power" to "melodic chromaticism" and "plenty of brutality," Thomson encourages Barber to shy away from his previous "mincing."[140] Painting Barber as a now freed man, he equates progress and modernist techniques with aesthetic authenticity.

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[136] Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004)
[137] Ibid., 129.
[138] Ibid., 50-51.
[139] Virgil Thomson, "Music" *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 December 1947.
[140] Ibid.

Later in a 1981 interview, Thomson again relies on problematic constructions of masculine aesthetic authenticity by focusing on Barber's financial success and popularity. He concludes that Barber's career "was not particularly interesting or eventful. It consisted of first performances and glorious occasions, standing ovations and large checks because he made more money than anybody."[141] Continuing the discussion of Barber's fiscal success, he calls the composer a "good businessman," whose music was "extremely well-constructed," and "very high-class but not hard to take."[142] Though these comments could be read as complimentary, Thomson's repeated mentions of Barber's "well-to-do" upbringing, popularity, and financial success rehearse the "cheap but not long lasting" trope that had developed homophobic connotations during this period.[143] By focusing so much on the residual effects of Barber's music, rather than the music itself, Thomson seems to make a tacit claim regarding Barber's aesthetic goals as motivated by money and success rather than more noble causes. Thomson eventually makes this assessment clear when finally pressed to comment on Barber's popularity, stating,

> I think [Barber's] idea of a successful musical work—I mean artistically successful—was something that could be played not necessarily in pop concerts but for the subscription public of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Now that's high middle-brow. It's not far from that of Rachmaninoff, who also lived in Philadelphia.[144]

Despite Thomson's own interest in challenging high/low binaries, and his championing of Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra elsewhere, his use of "middlebrow" reads as

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[141] Peter Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Centenary Tribute* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 110.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ned Rorem's discussion of Barber contains similar aesthetic attacks but is articulated as critiquing Barber's "elegance." See Ned Rorem, *Settling the Score: Essays on Music*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988). As Joseph Litvak has discussed, elegance and sophistication have long had queer implications that are often attacked for their surface or inauthenticity. See Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory and the Novel* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
[144] Dickinson, *Samuel Barber Remembered,* 117.

particularly damning of Barber's aesthetic goals.[145] The comparison to Rachmaninoff, for whom Thomson had undisguised disdain, further highlights his critical feelings towards Barber. While Thomson is correct in identifying accessibility as one of Barber's compositional goals (the composer himself expressing this sentiment on numerous occasions), I want to further interrogate his usage of the term "middlebrow" which is loaded with several important connotations.[146]

In fact, this invocation of the middlebrow reveals an important discourse that was emerging when Barber was writing *Vanessa,* most clearly articulated by mid-century cultural critic Dwight Macdonald. A long-term project, his essay "Mass and Midcult" expanded the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture by demonstrating the presence of an emerging cultural "threat" to high art.[147] Instead of focusing on lowbrow popular culture—Masscult in his terminology—MacDonald focused his attention on a "peculiar hybrid from [lowbrow's] unnatural intercourse with the [highbrow]."[148] He defined this middle culture—Midcult—as,

> having the essential qualities of Masscult—the formula, the built in reaction, the lack of any standard except popularity—but it decently covers them up with a cultural fig-leaf… Midcult has it both ways: it pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while it in fact waters them down and vulgarizes them.[149]

MacDonald gives examples like the Book of the Month club, "the transition from Rogers and Hart to Rogers and Hammerstein,"[150] and the Omnibus television program, which showed

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[145] Hubbs, *Queer Composition,* 150.
[146] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 124.
[147] Dwight MacDonald, *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), 34.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid., 35.
[150] MacDonald clarifies this by inviting comparison between "the gay tough lyrics of *Pal Joey*, a spontaneous expression of a real place called Broadway, to the folk-fakery of *Oklahoma!* and the [rotund] sentimentalities of *South Pacific*." Ibid.

"Beethoven and champion ice skaters" together. [151] MacDonald's rhetoric relies on a problematically rigid understanding of high culture that perpetuates masculinist canons and modernist notions of progress. For example, the majority of his examples of middlebrow are traditionally feminized forms of culture or texts that rely on emotional bonding with audiences; authenticity is explicitly viewed as antithetical to a work's popularity, accessibility, and emotional appeal. Thomson's characterization of Barber as "high middlebrow" thus reveals an important aspect of his own aesthetic position. Despite resisting high modernist serialism, Thomson remained indebted to modernist streams via his French training, separating him from Barber's bourgeois conservatism. Though linked by their homosexuality, the two composers remained firmly separated by their aesthetic lineages. Overall, these critiques demonstrate a suspicion of unbridled emotions in the new American cultural landscape, where modernist values of high art framed composers like Barber as problematically backwards. For straight critics Barber's sentimentality was a sign of his morally suspect and weak sexuality, while for some queer contemporaries it was a mark of his conservative selling-out.

III. Erika's Queer Sentimentality

Despite these accusations, Barber's remained unyielding in his sentimental inclinations. Even at an early point in his career, Barber responded to dominant modernist values stating that

> Skyscrapers, subways, and train lights play no part in the music I write. Neither am I at all concerned with the musical values inherent in geometric celebrations. My aim is to write good music that will be comprehensible to as many people as possible, instead of music heard only by small, snobbish musical societies in the large cities. The universal basis of artistic spiritual communication by means of art is through the emotions.[152]

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[151] Ibid.
[152] Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 130.

Explicitly citing emotional cultivation as his main compositional goal, Barber ignores popular styles of abstraction in order to better communicate with audiences. This connection was maintained throughout his oeuvre and is present in *Vanessa*'s melodramatic appeal. While critics may have dismissed the sentimental as regressive or weak, scholarship has reconsidered its value. For example, philosopher Robert Solomon defends sentimentality for its cultivation of "tender feelings," emotions like "pity, sympathy, fondness, adoration and compassion."[153] Solomon argues that

> No conception of ethics can be adequate unless it takes into account such emotions not as mere "inclinations" but as an essentially part of the substance of ethics itself... sentimentality in literature might be the best conceived as the cultivation and practice of our moral-emotional faculties.[154]

Though he points out that there is always a potential for pathological contexts and usages of sentimentality (for example Fascist appropriations of nostalgia), the actual substance of sentiment is a basis for ethical motivation. Solomon's work highlights how sentimental texts engage audiences to feel and empathize with relationships that are outside their own. The fictive thus becomes a space to practice and learn about situations that may not otherwise be accessible for audiences. Barber's desire to connect emotionally with audiences shows his sensitivity towards this power, supporting a relational model of listening that draws audiences to Erika's plight on stage.

In addition, many sentimental and melodramatic texts from the 1950s have been reevaluated for the cultural critique they provide. For example Douglas Sirk's films employ a masterful use of stylistic excess common to other melodramas, such as hyper-dramatic uses of lighting and color, but simultaneously manage to address large scale inequalities found in the

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[153] Richard C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9.
[154] Ibid.

1950s American landscape.[155] While still engaging audiences emotionally, Sirk refuses to patch over issues of gender, economic, or racial inequality and denies audiences a traditional happy ending, instead often leaving his characters in ambiguous positions. Thus his films rely on heightened emotional rhetoric to show the difficult negotiations that are needed to navigate life.[156] Like Erika, who ends up alone and seemingly loveless in the manor, Sirk's characters are faced with unhappy endings, leaving them in states of delusion or hermetic, lonely insanity; but as Sirk-devotee Rainer Werner Fassbinder states, "for Douglas Sirk, madness is a sign of hope."[157]

But what hope does *Vanessa* offer? Barber and Menotti, like Sirk, use the melodramatic mode to offer critique and destabilize normative narratives of love while still offering emotional appeal. For instance if *Vanessa* were the normative melodrama the opera would drastically change course in the third act. Realizing her mistakes, Vanessa would let Erika have Anatol. Anatol, having seen the disaster he has caused would realize his true love for Erika. Erika having felt Anatol's care would ignore his previous indiscretions and accept his love. Vanessa would realize her love for the doctor and the opera would end with a double wedding all under the approval of the Baroness. The reason that this can not happen is because Erika cannot do what Vanessa so willingly does: Erika cannot forget. As earlier discussed, the operative act of the melodramatic love plot is forgetting the pain and trauma experienced in seeking love. While her aunt swoons at the merest word from Anatol's mouth, Erika always remembers his hollowness. Though Anatol physically seduces her, Erika's persistent memory prevents her from settling for man that does not actually love her and allows her to resist the "utopic suturing" of normative

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[155] Mercer, *Melodrama*, 20.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Rainer Werner Fassbinder, "Six Films by Douglas Sirk" trans. Thomas Elsaesser, *New Left Review* (May-June 1975), 91.

love.[158] The result: she chooses to refuse his proposal, abort his child, and live out her days in solitude. While perhaps an unhappy ending, Erika manages to come to it on her own terms and is able to refigure the socially limited situation she is presented with. Rather than passively falling for Anatol's advances, Erika's choices allow her to control how her life is to be lived.

With the house willed to her by her aunt, Erika's ownership of the manor means that she can transform it as she sees fit. While she could flee like her aunt to more a hospitable climate, Erika remains within the environment that is now filled with seemingly bitter memories. By doing so, she participates in what Berlant deems is a "queer melodrama, a melodrama of the anomalous subject wrestling not to be free from conventionality but to find collective spaces for emotional thriving in proximity to it."[159] In this way I argue Erika is an importantly queer figure for both willingly participating in the love plot and inhabiting the domestic even after her traumatic story. Whereas a truly disenchanted figure would merely walk away from the entire situation, Erika remains in the manor to perform her steadfast attachment to her ideals of love. Erika uses the home to protect her idealistic, non-procreative form of lover reconfiguring its traditional role as a signifier of familial potential. Because of Erika's decisions, the manor has transformed from a gaudy signifier of marriage to a haven for quiet isolation and reflection within the span on of one act.

Barber uses the melodramatic mode not only to subvert its generic expectations through the use of the unhappy ending, but also to enjoy its musical associations. Instead of presenting Erika's alternative definition of love in a modernist style, he employs late-Romantic tonal and gestural language in order to make the opera accessible to a wider audience. This is similar to a

[158] Berlant, *Female Complaint,* 179.
[159] Ibid., 202.

"queer middlebrow" that Jamie Harker sees in Christopher Isherwood's writings.[160] Born the year before Barber, Isherwood faced similar critiques for his sentimental, often domestic-focused novels.[161] As Harker points out, Isherwood's "fatal readability" led him to be labeled as a middlebrow novelist as early as the 1930s, the same time when Barber's "mincingly respectable" concert works were receiving attention.[162] By the 1940s and 50s, Isherwood introduced unabashed gay characters and situations in his books while retaining the same middlebrow style of writing, all within the context of an aggressively masculinized literary culture.[163] Harker argues that Isherwood conflates gay liberatory politics with a normally conservative genre, thereby using the middlebrow as "a mode of authorship valuing identification, emotion, and a symbiotic relationship between reader and writers."[164] Isherwood's gay protest novels are thus read as exploring Cold War domesticity and homosexuality in order to speak to a wider audience of both homo- and heterosexuals.[165]

Like Harker, I argue that Barber's middlebrow inclinations—his emotionality, his formal conventionality, his Romantic language—destabilize several cultural binaries held up by critics. This includes the distinction between "art and trash, innovation and derivative, hard boiled and sentimental, radical and conservative… gay and mainstream."[166] By reevaluating *Vanessa*'s sentimentality, we can see the potentially dissident structures of love Barber celebrates within the opera. Barber's appeal to an audience's emotions offers a useful mode of identification to help assert a queer politics, not readily found within normal melodramatic texts. Though not as

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[160] Jamie Harker, *Middlebrow Queer: Christopher Isherwood in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
[161] Barber and Isherwood in fact have several overlapping qualities in their biographies as well as mutual friends such as Gore Vidal. Isherwood had met Menotti in 1950 while Menotti was in Hollywood, but there seems to be no direct connection between the author and Barber. Gruen, *Menotti*, 76.
[162] Harker, *Middlebrow Queer*, xi.
[163] Ibid., 5.
[164] Ibid., xiv.
[165] Ibid., xvi.
[166] Ibid.

explicit or politicized as Isherwood, Barber asks his audiences to listen to the beauty and emotional richness of a situation where normative love is not satisfying. Where we could focus on the falsity and delusion circulated in these relationships, I instead explore how Barber seeks to convince audiences of this complicated version of love by turning to the most sentimental part of the opera: the final quintet.

Regarded as the crowning achievement of the opera, the quintet has been lauded for its beauty, compositional sophistication, and emotional weight, and is often compared to the final trio in *Die Rosenkavalier*. After Erika has recovered from aborting her child, Vanessa and Anatol decide to begin their life anew and move to Paris. Before they say their final goodbyes, Vanessa looks around the house one last time and begins to sing. Soon Anatol, Erika, the Baroness, and the Doctor join her, as they all reflect on the meaning of love (See Example 4, Act IV, Scene 2, Rehearsal 55). Barber demonstrates his contrapuntal deftness as the voices enter in canon, repeating the same text. Specifically, I want to address two key features of the quintet: its text and its form.

Example 2.4. Text for the Quintet

Vanessa, Anatol, Erika, Baroness, Doctor:
To leave, to break, to find, to keep,
to stay, to wait, to hope, to dream,
to weep and remember.
To love is all of this, and none of it is love.
The light is not the sun, nor the tides the moon.

First, the text itself appropriately and poetically ruminates on the meaning of love. The infinitives, broke into five pairs (to leave/to break, to find/to keep, etc.) show the contradictory actions that all fall within "to love." Highlighting the gap between actions and ideals, the libretto places a sentimental aporia at the emotional apex of the opera. Though the characters have

performed these different actions there is still something ineffable that the they so anxiously try to articulate. Menotti's text signals an overwhelming excess of feeling, but what that feeling *is* remains specific to the individual. Each character brings a specific set of memories and attachments, but manages to still recite the same text, which is eventually obscured as the voices pile up in a mass texture rather than individual coherent statements.

Second, formally, Barber sets this as a five-voice fugue. The quintet harmonically operates as a long dominant build up, with each five-bar phrase repeating the same harmonic motion. With the addition of each voice, the counterpoint becomes more intricate and is accompanied with further elaboration in the orchestra. The brass doubles the voices, the strings and harps provided flourishes and runs so that by the time the final subject enters, Barber is using the largest sonic force in the entire opera. Despite this intense build up, the resolution is weak. Whereas his previous complex contrapuntal writing led to large climaxes, most notably in the duet between Vanessa and Anatol, Barber evades a cadence despite signaling resolution by a rhythmically broadened harmonic texture.

Completely suspending narrative movement, the quintet works by processes of accretion, layering, and thickening. Moving from one single line, the expansion and magnification of feeling fills scene to climax. The sonic and emotional density created by the fugue resolves two of the main threads I have been following in this chapter. First, it expands normal operatic expectations of love as something simply joyous or tragic. Instead of a solo aria or impassioned duet, the quintet allows for multiple voices to partake in defining love. Never clear-cut, love remains a complex network of negotiations and tensions that are only constantly shifting rather than resolving. The quintet captures these conflicting yet interlocking feelings of five different people and by doing so, shows love as something irreducible to a simple man-woman love plot.

Like Sirk's films or the *Rosenkavalier* trio, its beauty lies not only in its technical mastery but its ability to create an emotionally thickened picture of love.

Further, I argue that the quintet demonstrates how a queer relationship or use of melodrama is not limited to ironic or distancing perspectives. Whereas Sontag relies on framing melodrama as inauthentic and inhospitable for queers, Barber seeks to use melodrama to engage audiences with an alternative definition of love. Queer theorist David Halperin does admit that there is a way to live a queer life as melodrama, but it requires one "to accept the inauthenticity at the core of romantic love, to understand romantic love as a social institution, an ideology, a role, a performance, and a social genre, while still self-consciously and undeceivedly, succumbing to it."[167] While I believe his turn towards absolute inauthenticity is overly reductive, Halperin allows room for a queer mode of identification that is able to thrive within a markedly straight environment. Barber does not dismiss love as inauthentic but rather views queer experience as complicating and enriching the normal story of love. Because of his skill and emotional investment, the power of the quintet's queer sentiment is its ability to emotionally engage audiences enough to have them see different constructions of love.

Barber's sentimentality and melodramatic sensibility runs counter to established narratives of queer progress during the Cold War. Instead of embracing the modernist leanness of his queer contemporaries, not to mention the experimental tradition by way of Cowell and Cage, Barber sees room within romantic idioms for alternative views of love because of their ability to emotionally connect with others. Whereas Thomson and others may have been able to circulate queer meanings privately among their circle through coded language and references in their works, Barber invites audiences at large to savor the bittersweet complexities of *Vanessa* by

[167] Halperin, *How to be Gay*, 294.

engaging with them in a well-established musical language. Emotion, no matter how out of style it may be, fosters an important recognition.

Placing this engagement at the center of his compositional voice means that Barber blends his own dissident queer experience with the language of a wider discourse. Sentimentality's emotional amplification allows audiences to recognize the interior feelings and desires of others, thus Barber's feelings, his ways of life, his loves are carried to audiences by the musicians performing *Vanessa*. By framing this emotional transfer as an audience's investment in lives outside their own, I stress the role that listening plays in ethical encounters with alterity. An examination of Barber's and *Vanessa*'s intimate expressions, their willingness to explore private places and feelings that would otherwise be overlooked within public discourse, draws attention to the experiences, loves, and feelings music makes possible and asks us to listen to things we may not otherwise hear.

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