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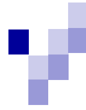

Composing in America's Closet: Queer Encoding in Barber and Menotti's Opera *Vanessa*

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The flourishing cultural movements in twentieth-century America were greatly indebted to and even directly fostered by various homosexual artistic communities. Scholars have only recently begun to consider the influence of such homosexual networks on American cultural development.[1] A pervasive homophobia throughout the 1900s necessitated that a particular ethical code permeate homosexual artistic circles; reviled by the American public, homosexual artists largely refrained from revealing their sexual orientation and that of their colleagues, and avoided provoking conspiracy theories by denying (at least publicly) that such networks existed.[2] Consequently, many gay artists employed art as a means of uncritical self-expression, and for many gay American composers, musical identity was inseparable from queer identity.[3]

American composer Samuel Barber (1910-1981), like so many of his contemporaries, spoke of his private life only reluctantly. At the age of nine, in a letter addressed to

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[1] Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay modernists, American music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 5.
[2] Ibid., 7.
[3] Ibid., 118.

his mother, Barber wrote,

> Dear Mother: I have written to tell you my worrying secret. Now don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now, without any nonsense. To begin with, I was not meant to be an athlete. I was meant to be a composer… Don't ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football. – Please.[4]

Michael S. Sherry argues that this letter represents not only a clear statement of Barber's sexual orientation but also an assertion of the very connection between the composer's musical and sexual identities; the arts traditionally represent an effeminate pursuit; sports, a predominantly masculine interest. By acknowledging these gendered categories, Barber reinforces the affiliation between his musical compositions and his homosexuality.[5] Although Sherry's reading bespeaks a certain presumption in the belief that a nine-year-old boy is fully conscious about his sexual orientation and gender binaries, Barber's letter at least demonstrates his self-regard as "different" and his awareness of music's gendered implications. Barber would later go on to become one of America's foremost composers, collaborating on many works with fellow composer Gian Carlo Menotti, with whom he shared an intimate relationship. Barber's own emphasis on the gender constructions involved in music and composition encourage a closer examination of the influences of the composer's homosexuality on his musical output. According to

[4] Michael S. Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 156.
[5] Ibid.

twentieth-century century critic James McCourt, Barber and Menotti's opera *Vanessa* represents "one of the most encoded queer operas of the age."[6] Although McCourt does not elaborate further on this argument, possible "queer-encoded meanings" appear throughout the opera and merit further investigation.

In his book *The Queen's Throat*, Wayne Koestenbaum describes music and words as inevitably "gendered properties."[7] Koestenbaum argues that traditionally, music represents the subservient female, while the libretto denotes the dominating male. He goes on to explain, however, that these gendered properties are "transgressed" in opera, determined by the sexes of their composers and librettists. Historically, composer and librettist together comprise a male duo, and Koestenbaum explains that for homosexuals, opera offers a symbolic same sex union. However, the symbolic homoerotic marriage of music and text is especially significant in *Vanessa* - Barber and Menotti's own homosexual relationship mirrors (or perhaps intensifies) the association of music and libretto throughout the opera.

Barber began his search for an opera libretto decades before *Vanessa*'s premiere in 1958. After rejecting several offers from reputable poets and writers, Barber nearly gave up his opera project entirely. However, in 1952, when his partner Menotti offered to write the text, Barber could not refuse; Menotti's years of experience writing librettos for his

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[6] Sherry, *Gay Artists in Modern American Culture: An Imagined Conspiracy*, 165.

[7] Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (Toronto: Poseidon Press, 1993), 177.

own operas offered Barber an unparalleled opportunity.[8] According to Barber, Menotti felt that his libretto merely acted as a pretext from which Barber was to expand, elaborate and illuminate the narrative with his music. Barber, on the other hand, regarded Menotti's particular "econom[ical]" use of words as an integral part of the opera, especially regarding the theatrical timing.[9] Barber even referred to Menotti's libretto for *Vanessa* as, "the finest and most chiselled of his libretti."[10] Interestingly, Menotti commented that only "true…love" allowed him to surrender his carefully crafted libretto to his fellow composer and partner.[11] Evidently, Barber and Menotti's conception of the music-text relationship in *Vanessa* defies any traditional gendered hierarchies.

Koestenbaum argues that the symbolic homoerotic marriage of composer and libretto, of music and text, evokes the concept of same-sex procreation. He claims that in the male operatic collaboration, both artists feel that "they are doing the miraculous work of gestation together."[12] Koestenbaum observes a phenomenon not exclusive to the twentieth century, but extending back several centuries. Regardless, Barber's own descriptions of *Vanessa*'s composition are striking in their 'creationist' language. For example, in an article Barber wrote for the

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[8] Samuel Barber, "Birth Pangs of a First Opera," *New York Times* (January 12, 1958): p. X9, online, available: ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times (1851 - 2004)*, [database online, UWO], ID: 89036509, accessed 2007, November 20.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Menotti, interviewed by John Gutman during radio broadcast of *Vanessa*, 1 February 1958. Tape at New York Public Library, Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives or Recorded Sound in *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music*, Barbara B. Heyman, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 381.
[12] Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 187.

New York Times in 1958, he discusses his frustration in waiting for Menotti to finish the libretto; Menotti, being a composer himself, frequently had to stop writing to assist with the production of his own opera, *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, which was also premiering that same year.[13] Barber's descriptions prompted the copy editor to title the article, "Birth Pangs of a First Opera." Even the newspaper's copy editor reasserts the image of *Vanessa* as Barber and Menotti's progeny.

Although homosexual operatic collaborations such as Barber's and Menotti's remain unusual, another famous American partnership offers a point of comparison for *Vanessa*. The opera *The Tender Land,* composed in 1954 by Aaron Copland, was set to a libretto by Erik Johns, Copland's lover at the time. In his article "Expanding Horizons: Sexuality and the Re-Zoning of the *Tender Land*," musicologist Daniel E. Mathers claims that in *The Tender Land*, Copland and Johns publicly articulate their privately shared lives as homosexual lovers and musical collaborators in twentieth-century America.[14] Mathers explains that the opera's main character, Laurie, serves as a vehicle through which the homosexual artists express an intimate message. Mathers' argument endorses Ralph P. Locke's view that private concerns in particular may be easily expressed through female characters, concerns that

[13] Barber, "Birth Pangs of a First Opera," p. X9

[14] Daniel E. Mathers, "Expanding Horizons: Sexuality and the Re-Zoning of *the Tenderland*," in *Copland Connotations: Studies and Interviews*, ed. Peter Dickinson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), 118.

"society could not comfortably express through 'men.'"[15]

The Tender Land tells the story of Laurie, a young teenage girl living in the rural American mid-west during the 1930s. After a 'coming of age' encounter with Martin, a young man visiting her family's farming community, Laurie decides to leave her sheltered life behind and heads for the big city. Mathers explains that *The Tender Land*'s conclusion extends beyond the immediate consequences of the opera by speaking directly to a homosexual audience.[16] Laurie's departure from her hometown symbolizes the gay man's emergence from the shadowy confines of the closet.

Like *The Tender Land, Vanessa*'s narrative mimics a "coming-out" scenario while at the same time suggesting an allegorical depiction of life as a homosexual artist in modern America. In fact, in a poignant message prefacing the opera's score, Menotti writes: "This is 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 oneself off from reality, or compromise with what life has to offer, even lying to oneself for the mere sake of living."[17] Menotti's text serves as an invitation to examine the opera's narrative through a homosexual lens with a particular focus on the opera's female characters.

While waiting for the return of her long-lost lover, Vanessa completely shuts herself off from the outside

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[15] Ralph P. Locke, "What Are These Women Doing in Opera?" in *En Travesti: Women, Gender, Suberversion, Opera*, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith, 59-98 (Columbia University Press: New York, 1985), 74.

[16] Mathers, "Expanding Horizons," 133.

[17] Samuel Barber, *Vanessa*, text by Gian Carlo Menotti (New York: G Schirmer, 1964), IV.

world and imposes the same isolation on her niece, Erika. Upon receiving word of her lover's return, Vanessa is disappointed to discover that the man is not her lover, but rather his son, Anatol. Vanessa, Erika and Anatol become tangled up in an impassioned love affair. At the opera's conclusion, Vanessa leaves with Anatol and Erika returns to her solitary lifestyle.

Here too, *The Tender Land* offers a useful point of comparison for extrapolating specific homoerotic encodings within *Vanessa*. Mathers isolates several important themes that contribute to the expression of homosexuality in Copland's *The Tender Land*. Themes such as Laurie's "enlargement of consciousness" (both mentally and physically) through her encounter with Martin, who represents "the outside world," suggest a 'coming out' scenario, in which the protagonist's "self-recognition of being sexually different is dawning."[18] Similarly, in *Vanessa,* Erika's consciousness is initially limited to the world of Vanessa's private estate but expands when she encounters Anatol, who represents the "outside world." As the two characters become intimate both emotionally and physically, Erika's limited perception expands to include a life beyond the four walls of her aunt's opulent estate. The first indication of her transition occurs in Act I, Scene 2. During a recitative passage, Erika's grandmother asks her whether or not she loves Anatol. In response, Erika sings "Oh yes, Oh yes, I love someone like him." This musical line is marked in the score as "rising" and "suddenly transported."[19] Erika's melodic line is accompanied by a

[18] Barber, *Vanessa*, 131.
[19] Ibid., 59.

sudden burst of passion in which Barber expands the orchestration to include a larger range of timbres and dynamics, thereby contrasting the sparse accompaniment of the previous section. Barber even writes the word “broadening” in the score in order to emphasize the significance of this sudden change.[20] This important sonic event illustrates Erika’s expansion of consciousness, which parallels that of Laurie in *the Tender Land* and, more abstractly, that of the homosexual male.

Perhaps the most musically palpable indication of this expansion of consciousness (or symbolically, an increasing awareness of sexual difference) occurs in Act II, scene 1. In a moment of solemn self-evaluation, Erika wanders over to the fireplace and climbs up onto a chair before a picture hanging over the mantel. As she uncovers the portrait of her Aunt Vanessa, painted wearing the ball-gown of a young woman, Erika cannot help but notice that she herself resembles the younger version of her aunt. In the score, Menotti describes the subsequent action:

> 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.[21]

Erika’s actions in this scene symbolically depict the homosexual man’s discovery of his sexual difference; he first regards this difference with “morbid fascination” but

[20] Barber, *Vanessa*, 60.
[21] Ibid., 124.

eventually comes to accept his sexual difference with "pride and defiance."

Anatol's decision to marry Vanessa leaves Erika heartbroken and betrayed. In response, she requests that all the mirrors in the house be covered up, the doors barred, and visitors discouraged from arriving. This isolation mirrors Vanessa's self-seclusion earlier in the opera. Before the curtain falls, Erika covers her face with the same veil that covered her aunt's in the opening scenes of the opera and proclaims, "Now it is my turn to wait." Despite her previous expansion of consciousness and increased awareness of the outside world, Erika decides to remain locked up in her house, tormented by nostalgia and the disappointment of her impassioned love affair. Despite Erika's desire to be part of the outside world, Anatol's rejection triggers her desperate gesture of self-defence. Erika's actions parallel that of the gay American artist in the twentieth century, who, although desiring an open life, is prevented from achieving this liberty.[22]

Sherry explains that the female protagonist's dual role as operatic character and symbolic vehicle for the expression of forbidden sexual desires was a technique used widely not only among homosexual composers, but also visual and dramatic artists in twentieth-century America. In fact, *New York Times* critics Howard Taubman and Stanley Kauffmann boldly urged homosexual playwrights to "stop imposing their psychological torments onto heterosexual characters and narratives and put their own sick lives on the stage instead."

[22] Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay modernists, American music, and National Identity*, 5.

Finally, Barber and Menotti's *Vanessa* presents an unusual void in its absence of prominent male characters. Whereas an equilibrium between male and female roles is traditionally maintained (both for musical and dramatic reasons), *Vanessa* proves an interesting exception. Furthermore, Vanessa's triumphant departure with Anatol defies traditional operatic expectations; often, female characters sacrifice themselves through suicide as a means of expressing their unrequited love for their resistant lover. Interestingly, although Erika's relationship to Vanessa, her aunt, is a prominent connection throughout the opera, there is never any mention of her parents. Here again, Koestenbaum's queer reading suggests a symbolic meaning: Erika's family relations parallel the homosexual male's struggle to understand his sexuality in the context of his heterosexual parentage and upbringing.

Barber's uncle, Sidney Homer, knew of Barber's intention to compose an opera well before *Vanessa's* actual composition. In 1952, when Barber informed Homer of his decision to use Menotti's libretto, Homer expressed serious concern regarding Menotti's propensity for fictitious, irrelevant plots in a letter:

> I heard some of Gian Carlo's opera last night. This is the kind of story I do not like. I believe the most impressive plots are those which are most true to life and could most easily happen. I believe the modern American mind wants truth and no deception, dust or camouflage. [The] idea is to lift the standard of living in all backward countries by teaching them modern methods of production. [I] know great works

of art will come from it.[23]

Homer maintains that his nephew's opera ought to depict more 'normal' events of everyday American life. Ironically, it is through great works such as *Vanessa* that American composers like Barber and Menotti literally and symbolically give voice to a very particular reality confronting the modern American artist: the experience of a life lived within the shadowy confines of the American closet.

[23] Homer Barber, *Letter, 6 April 1952*, from Winter Park, in Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber: the Composer and his Music*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 378.

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