



"Life Is Strife": American Operatic Heroines During the Cold War

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**“Life is Strife”:
American Operatic Heroines during the Cold War**

A dissertation presented by

Monica A. Hershberger

to

The Department of Music

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Music

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**“Life is Strife”:
American Operatic Heroines during the Cold War**

Abstract

American opera—meaning opera written in English by composers in the United States—experienced unparalleled popularity after World War II. In this dissertation, I argue that by centering on the struggles of American women both real and imagined, a number of composers, librettists, and perhaps most importantly, sopranos, revitalized opera in and of the United States. Suddenly, American opera flourished in opera houses, on Broadway, in universities and conservatories, and on television. Combining extensive archival research, close musical and textual analysis, oral history, and reception history, I investigate and prioritize the voices and stories of the women in and of American opera. I examine Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s *The Mother of Us All* (1947), Gian-Carlo Menotti’s *The Consul* (1950), Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah* (1955), and Jack Beeson, Kenward Elmslie, and Richard Plant’s *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait* (1965), four operas that revolve around compelling heroines. I approach these works as both texts and as lived experiences, and I argue that through them and from a variety of feminist vantage points including those illuminated by American sopranos, we can see how on stage and off, American women often uttered and embodied the complex quest for national identity that accompanied the Cold War in the United States. By focusing on the way national and feminist identities sometimes collude and at other times collide in these operas and on their heroines, I show how we may better understand operatic authorship, American opera as a genre, the nature of American composition and performance within the context of the Cold War, the culture of the Cold War more broadly, and the advent of modern feminism.

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For my mother, Susan A.

INTRODUCTION

“In Search of American Opera” Again

In his 1991 essay “In Search of American Opera,” American composer Ned Rorem credited the Italian-American composer Gian-Carlo Menotti (1911-2007) with “singlehandedly revitaliz[ing] the concept of living opera in the United States.”¹ To be sure, American opera experienced unparalleled popularity in the US after World War II, and Menotti played an important role. Yet Rorem was exaggerating, for Menotti accomplished nothing “singlehandedly.” More accurately, by centering on the struggles of American women—real and imagined—a number of composers, librettists, and perhaps most importantly, sopranos, “revitalized” opera in and of the United States. Thus my search for American opera has led me to investigate and prioritize the stories of the women in and of the genre. Combining extensive archival research, close musical and textual analysis, oral history, and reception history, I examine Menotti’s *The Consul* (1950), Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah* (1955), and Jack Beeson, Kenward Elmslie, and Richard Plant’s *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait* (1965), three operas that revolve around compelling heroines. I frame these three operas with analyses of the genesis and major revival of *The Mother of Us All*, Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein’s 1947 opera about the life and work of suffragette Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906).²

Throughout this dissertation, I approach *The Mother of Us All*, *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* as both texts and lived experiences, and I argue that through them and from a variety of feminist vantage points, we can see how on stage and off, American women often uttered and

¹ Ned Rorem, “In Search of American Opera,” *Opera News*, July 1991, p. 10.

² It is to this opera that the first half of my dissertation title refers.

embodied the complex quest for national identity that accompanied the Cold War in the United States. By examining the way national and feminist identities sometimes collude and at other times collide in these operas and on their heroines, I show how we may better understand American opera as a genre, the nature of American composition and performance within the context of the Cold War, the culture of the Cold War more broadly, and the advent of modern feminism.

In the following chapters, I present three operatic and personal case studies, illuminating how the characters Magda Sorel (of *The Consul*), Susannah Polk (of *Susannah*), and Lizzie Borden (of *Lizzie Borden*) embody three very different versions of mid-twentieth-century American womanhood. I introduce these case studies, however, with a short prequel, beginning in 1945, the year Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein began working on their second opera. Stein died shortly after completing the libretto, and Thomson revised it by himself as he composed his music. Drawing for the first time from both versions of the libretto text, as well as from the musical score, I show how *The Mother of Us All* established a complexity and multiplicity of authorial voice and a pairing of nationalism and burgeoning feminism that would continue to inform operatic creation, performance, and reception in the United States over the course of the next two decades.

The Mother of Us All represents a precursor and model for the way I approach *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden*, for *The Mother's* origins, premiere, and 1976 revival (in conjunction with the American Bicentennial) demonstrate that throughout the Cold War, ideas about nationalism and feminism continued to shift and evolve. Largely a war of ideas, the Cold War challenged Americans to contemplate, often reluctantly, their faith in numerous aspects of the American system. Mid-century American opera represents one way Americans staged these myriad shifting political, social, and cultural concerns, and Magda Sorel, Susannah Polk, and Lizzie

Borden, imprinted on and by the American singers who brought them to life, show how American women were constantly called upon to negotiate these shifts in body and voice.

The subject of Chapter 1, Magda Sorel, is a desperate mother from an unidentified totalitarian country “somewhere in Europe.”³ Her future becomes so bleak in *The Consul* that she finally commits a gruesome suicide by gas. Constructing Magda, Menotti defined the American mother through opposition, yet it was soprano Patricia Neway’s utterly terrifying portrayal of the protagonist that drove home the message that war-ravaged Europe was a place in which the family with the capable housewife at its helm, had been destroyed. As suggested by historian Elaine Tyler May’s work, this message dovetailed effectively with contemporary notions about motherhood and the American family—an institution that had to remain strong to serve as a bulwark against communism.⁴

Fifteen years later, Lizzie Borden stepped out onto the operatic stage in Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant’s *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait*, fashioned after the thirty-two-year-old New England spinster whose world was tightly controlled by her father and step-mother until someone hacked them to death with an axe one stiflingly hot morning in August 1892. The real Lizzie Borden (1860-1927) was tried and acquitted of the crime, yet in the court of public opinion, she remained guilty. In my examination of *Lizzie Borden* in Chapter 2, I show how the initial librettist, a writer named Richard Plant, identified with Lizzie’s presumed guilt. He discovered Lizzie’s case in 1945, at which point he had been living in the United States for seven years. A gay German-Jewish

³ See the preface to Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Consul: Musical Drama in Three Acts, Libretto* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1950).

⁴ See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Fully Revised and Updated 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988, 1999, 2008).

émigré, Plant was struggling to come to terms with the Holocaust and those he had left behind, including his father and stepmother, when he fled Frankfurt in 1933. I argue that his Lizzie represents his attempt to “become an American” by reconciling with his past and his sense of survivor guilt.⁵ At the same time, *Lizzie Borden* also speaks to the anxieties that accompanied the rise of the modern feminist movement in the United States because ultimately, the composer (Jack Beeson) and his two librettists transformed Lizzie into a woman who appears to hack patriarchal oppression to death. Problematically, they insisted that she go mad while doing so. After Lizzie loses her mind in the opera, she remolds herself in the shape of her father. At the end of the opera, she is, according to Beeson, “the spitting image of her father.”⁶ She even sounds like him, singing fragments of his melodic and textual motives. Mezzo-soprano Brenda Lewis pointed out to me that *Lizzie* turned the notion of the idealized American family that had informed *The Consul* on its head, demonstrating how by the mid-1960s, the familial construct no longer had quite the same grip over the American woman’s body.⁷ The larger patriarchal construct, however, was still alive and well, for on one level, *Lizzie Borden* suggested that unruly women simply wanted to become the patriarchy, not dismantle it.

⁵ In 1986, Richard Plant wrote about his first trip back to Frankfurt as follows: “I had become an American, and nothing in a Frankfurt reborn or revisited could frighten me or shake me, I thought. I was wrong.” See *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 197-198.

⁶ Jack Beeson, speaking at the Works & Process performance series devoted to the NYCO’s production of *Lizzie*. This event took place and was recorded at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York, on 21 February 1999. See *Lizzie Borden: New Visions, Works & Process at the Guggenheim*, produced by Mary Sharp Cronson, DVD, The New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections – Dance, MGZIDVD 5-1114.

⁷ Brenda Lewis, interview with the author, Westport, Connecticut, 7 March 2016.

Appearing five years after *The Consul* and ten years prior to *Lizzie Borden*, Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* has often been understood as a commentary on the McCarthy Era.⁸ Inspired by Susanna of the Biblical tale of Susanna and the Elders, Susannah Polk is an eighteen-year-old woman who lives in an isolated Tennessee mountain community. Her world begins to crumble when the elders of the community spy her bathing naked in a creek and embarrassed by their feelings of lust, begin to spread vicious rumors about her virtue. As Floyd composed both the libretto and the music for *Susannah*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) was running on Broadway. In this play, Miller used the 1692-93 Salem witch trials as an allegory for McCarthyism, and Susannah's plight against false accusations has often been understood as analogous to John Proctor's struggle in *The Crucible*.⁹ Yet the sopranos who have given voice to *Susannah* have attested to another interpretation of the heroine's plight. When Susannah refuses to repent for sins she did not commit, the Reverend Olin Blitch seeks her out in private, presumably to change her mind and save her soul. Instead, he rapes her. Thus Susannah is not only a victim of false accusation; she is also a victim of rape. In Chapter 3, I prioritize this aspect of Susannah's struggle, using testimony gathered from numerous American sopranos to show how Susannah, who stands up for herself and sings through to the opera's conclusion, may offer a model for feminist resistance in a culture that normalizes rape and prioritizes national narratives of resistance at the expense of feminist ones.

After Chapter 3, I return to *The Mother of Us All*, focusing on the Santa Fe Opera's 1976 revival in a short sequel. At Santa Fe, tension between national and feminist narratives re-emerged.

⁸ The McCarthy Era refers to the years between 1950 and 1956, when Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (1908-1957) recklessly accused many Americans of being communist-sympathizers and/or agents of the Soviet Union. Yet as scholars such as Richard M. Fried point out, "there was far more to the 'McCarthy era' than Senator Joseph R. McCarthy." See *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), vii.

⁹ See Arthur Miller, *The Crucible: A Play in Four Acts* (New York: Viking Press, 1953). See also Arthur Miller, "It Could Happen Here—And Did," *New York Times*, 30 April 1967.

Drawing on materials from the Santa Fe Opera Archives, I show how with their lavish and over-the-top revival, the Santa Fe Opera sought to graft nationalism and feminism together in *The Mother of Us All*, subsuming feminism under the banner of Americanism. At least one woman resisted. She asserted her voice from the audience, rather than from on stage. I argue that her voice merits our consideration.

Methodology

Notions of authorial voice and sometimes competing, sometimes collaborating national and feminist agendas weave like threads throughout the following chapters in which I examine three operas, all authored—at least in the literal sense—by men. Menotti wrote both the music and libretto for *The Consul*, and Floyd (b. 1926) followed suit in *Susannah*. In the case of *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait*, Beeson (1921-2010), Elmslie (b. 1929), and Plant (1910-1998) formed a three-man creative team. Yet *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* revolve, like *The Mother of Us All*, around a powerful heroine, requiring a committed soprano or mezzo-soprano. In fact, each of these operas was initially championed by a single woman. In the case of *The Consul*, it was Patricia Neway (1919-2012); in the case of *Susannah*, Phyllis Curtin (1921-2016), and in the case of *Lizzie Borden*, Brenda Lewis (b. 1921). Over the years, other voices have come to bear on these operas, yet the “original” voices remain definitive. As the works’ formative interpreters, Neway, Curtin, and Lewis remain, to a certain extent, authors.

My approach to authorship is influenced by the work of numerous scholars, including philosopher Catherine Clément, musicologist Carolyn Abbate, and musical theater historian Stacy Wolf. In her book, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (first published in English in 1988), Clément argued that opera upholds a patriarchal social order, demanding that women submit to authority,

usually through death.¹⁰ By re-telling many of the most famous operatic plots from the perspective of the female victims/heroines, Clément sought to bring opera's gender politics to the fore. At times in the following pages, I adopt Clément's model of writing and interpreting through the eyes of the operatic heroine for the very same purpose.

In her now classic 1991 study, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Abbate questioned Clément's unrelenting emphasis on plot, noting that such narrow focus discounts the sheer power of women's voices in opera. As Abbate put it, a heroine may be "undone by plot" and "yet triumphant in voice."¹¹ I find this to be true, for example, in the case of Magda Sorel. In a 1974 interview, soprano Patricia Neway stated that Magda should not and would not have committed suicide, pointing out that she was too strong a character.¹² Perhaps she was also too strong a voice, for more than her gruesome death, one remembers her glorious voice at the end of her Act II aria "To this we've come." This was the moment almost every single music critic noted in reviews of *The Consul* in 1950 and in Neway's various obituaries in 2012.

With *Unsung Voices*, Abbate sought to "move from the monological authority of 'the Composer,'" encouraging readers to listen for the many musical voices "that inhabit a work."¹³ This has helped to shape my approach to *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden*, for in addition to the composer's voice and narrative, I aim to illuminate other voices and other narratives within

¹⁰ See Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing, with a foreword by Susan McClary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

¹¹ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), ix.

¹² Patricia Neway, interview with John Gruen, 8 April 1974, 4. "John Gruen Gian-Carlo Menotti Research Files Collection," Folder 9: Patricia Neway, Curtis Institute of Music Archives, MS 23.

¹³ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, x.

and around the music. Here, I am also very much indebted to Stacy Wolf's 2011 *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* in which Wolf set out to understand how Broadway musicals from the 1950s to the early 2000s have contributed to a feminist performance history.¹⁴ Similarly, I seek to locate a feminist creation and performance history in American opera, focusing more narrowly on works that originated during the Cold War and in a transhistorical route, tracing them to the present day. Thus I approach *The Mother of Us All*, *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* as living works or as musicologist Charles Hiroshi Garrett puts it, sites for struggle and change.¹⁵ Drawing from the work of Abbate, Wolf, and Garrett, I argue that even in cases where Clément might rightly argue that the composer and/or librettist(s) are re-inscribing patriarchal structures, the performer(s) may in fact be circumventing, resisting, or displacing such structures.

The Mother of Us All, *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* demonstrate the frequent collisions—both friendly and antagonistic—of nationalism and feminism in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* also highlight the ways that American sopranos and mezzo-sopranos were required to negotiate these collisions, not only on the operatic stage, but off it as well. As Abbate reminds us, “music is written by a composer, but made and given phenomenal reality by performers.”¹⁶ In addition to this “phenomenal reality,” I

¹⁴ Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

¹⁵ Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 16. Garrett conceives of music “as a terrain of conflict,” noting that “though attending to power relationships in the study of music serves to identify the varieties of dominance, this method of inquiry also helps detect and measure currents of political resistance.”

¹⁶ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, x.

am interested in the stories and experiences of the American sopranos who helped create these roles. When we listen for this perspective, we can hear and see how non-fictional women's voices and bodies sometimes articulated and at other times contested patriarchal power structures in the United States during the Cold War.

Although several excellent surveys of American opera exist, including Elise K. Kirk's 2001 *American Opera* and John Dizikes's 1993 *Opera in America*, scant scholarship addresses *The Mother of Us All*, *The Consul*, *Susannah*, or *Lizzie Borden* in depth, and no scholarship tackles the shared priorities on display in these four works.¹⁷ Almost no attention, moreover, has been accorded the performers whose experiences and expertise helped bring the heroines of these operas to life.¹⁸ Thus with this dissertation, I seek to revive both of these dormant histories. I draw on scholarship in musicology, American studies, Cold War cultural history, and women's and gender studies. I also rely heavily on archival collections; I have examined thousands of documents in collections preserved by libraries and opera companies across the United States. Crucial to the success of this project were Carlisle Floyd's Papers at the South Caroliniana Library, Jack Beeson's Papers at Columbia University, Richard Plant's Papers at the New York Public Library (NYPL), as well as numerous other collections at the NYPL, Columbia, Yale University, Florida State University, the Curtis Institute of Music, and the Santa Fe Opera. In the case of *The Consul*, I worked to

¹⁷ See Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); John Dizikes, *Opera in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See also Gilbert Chase, "Toward an American Opera" in *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present, Revised Third Edition, With a Foreword by Richard Crawford and a Discographical Essay by William Brooks* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 543-561.

¹⁸ Patricia Neway, Phyllis Curtin, and Brenda Lewis have merely been profiled occasionally in publications such as *Opera News* and *Musical America*.

triangulate among a variety of archival collections and secondary sources because Menotti's Papers, controlled by his son, are not currently available to the public.¹⁹

Whenever possible, I interviewed composers, conductors, and sopranos in an effort to better understand these operas within the realm of lived experience. Many of the people whose contributions I study are unfortunately no longer living. However, I was able to spend two days interviewing composer Carlisle Floyd in his home in Tallahassee, Florida. I spent an afternoon with mezzo-soprano Brenda Lewis in her home in Westport, Connecticut, and I spoke with soprano Phyllis Curtin by telephone, several months before her death. I also interviewed Anton Coppola, who conducted the premiere of *Lizzie Borden*, as well as the composer's daughter Miranda Beeson.²⁰ Finally, I spoke and corresponded with several sopranos who performed the roles of some of these heroines in various revivals. These sopranos include Sharon Daniels, Phyllis Pancella, and Phyllis Treigle.

History and Literature: American Operatic Culture Before World War II

By midcentury, American opera—and in this case, I mean opera written in English by composers in the United States—was not exactly new. The Metropolitan Opera Company (Met) produced its first work by an American composer in 1910, yet this opera, George Frederick

¹⁹ I am grateful to musicologist Barbara Heyman for this information. Heyman is working on a revised edition of her biography of composer Samuel Barber (1910-1981), Menotti's life-partner for several years. See *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Heyman explained to me that she has been trying unsuccessfully to gain access to Menotti's personal papers, currently in the possession of Francis "Chip" Menotti. According to Heyman, Francis Menotti is trying to sell his father's papers to the Library of Congress.

²⁰ The uncle of film director Francis Ford Coppola, Anton Coppola (b. 1917) has worked as an opera conductor, composer, and artistic director. He helped to found Opera Tampa in 1996, serving as its Founding Artistic Director until 2012. Opera Tampa gave the premiere of Coppola's opera *Sacco and Vanzetti* in 2001. For an examination of this opera, see Eugene H. Cropsey, "Sacco and Vanzetti: An American World Premiere," *The Opera Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2003): 754-780.

Converse's *The Pipe of Desire*, was not well received by critics or audiences. In fact, American opera long struggled to become a cultural fixture at the Met and in the United States, eclipsed almost entirely by a musical repertory and performance institution with tenacious ties to Europe. Prior to World War II, American composers routinely sought to domesticate the genre, often with little lasting success. In 1941, for example, Elizabeth Eulass brought readers of the magazine *Opera News* up to date on Deems Taylor's *Peter Ibbetson*. Taylor's opera had premiered at the Metropolitan ten years earlier, on 7 February 1931, receiving a respectable sixteen performances in four seasons.²¹ According to Giulio Gatti-Casazza, it was "one opera that should succeed with the public."²² Yet by 1941, *Peter Ibbetson* was forgotten, and in 1947, Taylor informed Verna Arvey, wife of composer William Grant Still, that he had given up on opera.²³

Thus European opera held sway in the United States, virtually overshadowing attempts by American composers. As musicologist Katherine K. Preston demonstrated in her 1993 study *Opera on the Road*, touring opera companies were quite popular throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁴ Focusing on the activities of Italian and English troupes, Preston showed that opera was a vital part of American musical culture during this time. Indeed, Americans flocked to see European operas in theaters throughout the country. Karen Ahlquist has also

²¹ Music critic Olin Downes wrote a long and enthusiastic review of *Peter Ibbetson* in the *New York Times*. See "Great Ovation Won by 'Peter Ibbetson' at World Premiere: Deems Taylor's Native Opera is Greeted with 36 Curtain Calls at Metropolitan," *New York Times*, 8 February 1931.

²² Giulio Gatti-Casazza, quoted in Elizabeth Eulass, "American Opera at the Metropolitan After Ten Years," *Opera News*, 3 February 1941, p. 28-29.

²³ Deems Taylor, quoted in Verna Arvey, "Deems Taylor Talks of Cabbages and Kings," *Opera Concert and Symphony* 12, no. 6 (1947): 34.

²⁴ See Katherine K. Preston, *Opera on the Road: Traveling Opera Troupes in the United States, 1825-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

studied the popularity of European opera. Her 1997 examination *Democracy at the Opera* spoke both to the operatic importance of New York City from 1815-1860, and challenged opera's status as "high culture."²⁵ Ahlquist explained how an economically diverse, rather than purely elite audience helped to establish opera in New York, contending, moreover, that "opera was successful in New York in spite of its European origins, rather than because of it."²⁶ During the latter half of the nineteenth century, opera's status began to change. Suddenly, its cachet came precisely from its being a European import. For example, in her 2015 dissertation, musicologist Kristin Meyers Turner examines the class implications of European opera sung in English translation at the end of the nineteenth century, showing how music critics identified foreign-language grand opera as a "high art," whereas they tended to view the same operas sung in English as middle-class entertainment.²⁷

Americans were eager to consume European opera outside the walls of the opera house as well, purchasing sheet music and later recordings of their favorite European operas. As Mark Katz has shown, "the phonograph was widely embraced during the first three decades of the twentieth century as the best way to bring classical music to the American home, school, and community."²⁸ Here, opera was a favorite genre, a prime example of what Americans at the time thought of as

²⁵ See Karen Ahlquist, *Democracy at the Opera: Music, Theater, and Culture in New York City, 1815-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, xii.

²⁷ See Kristen M. Turner, "Opera in English: Class and Culture in America, 1878-1910," PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015. Interestingly, Turner complicates this picture by including an examination of the African American press's response to the English-language performances by the all-black Theodore Drury Grand Opera Company, noting that in this case, opera in English translation was viewed as "high art." Thus Turner demonstrates how "rhetoric about opera engaged with issues of class, race, gender, and nationalism."

²⁸ Mark Katz, "Making America More Musical through the Phonograph, 1900-1930," *American Music* 16, no. 4 (1998): 467.

“good music,” “the better class of music,” “first-class music,” “great music,” and “the best music.”²⁹ At the same time, however, opera managed to influence American popular song traditions. Larry Hamberlin has explored the various ways in which European opera was referred to and/or quoted in popular music during the ragtime era, including songs such as “When Miss Patricia Salome Did Her Funny Little Oo La Palome” (1907) and “Poor Butterfly” (1916).³⁰ What all of these studies suggest is that opera’s status in the United States was complicated; it could be molded to be “high class” and “middle class” all at once.

While European opera certainly held sway in the United States, there are notable exceptions to a narrative that suggests that American opera was entirely absent before the 1940s. As musicologist Elise K. Kirk pointed out, during Giulio Gatti-Casazza’s long tenure as General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, the company staged fourteen American operas, beginning with *The Pipe of Desire*.³¹ This opera proved to be something of a flop, but later American operas such as Charles Wakefield Cadman’s *Shanewis, the Robin Woman* (1918) and Deems Taylor’s *The King’s Henchman* (1927) and *Peter Ibbetson* (1931) fared somewhat better.³² Kirk unequivocally praised Gatti-Casazza for giving a much needed “boost and visibility to American composers.”³³ To his credit, Gatti-Casazza implied in his memoir that one of his “inescapable obligations” to “the

²⁹ Ibid., 449. Katz writes that “only Europe” was perceived as producing this “good music.”

³⁰ See Larry Hamberlin, *Tin Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³¹ Kirk, *American Opera*, 163. Giulio Gatti-Casazza served as the Met’s sole director from 1910 to 1935, the longest tenure in the Met’s history.

³² Looking back on the Met in 1969, music critic John Briggs referred to *The Pipe of Desire* as “an immediate and decisive failure.” See *Requiem for a Yellow Brick Brewery: A History of the Metropolitan Opera* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 128.

³³ Kirk, *American Opera*, 183.

great American lyric theatre was to foster and promote the development of American opera”; he also acknowledged that “no national school of opera has ever developed without the incentive of performances.”³⁴ Read in isolation, this piece of evidence would seem to suggest that Gatti-Casazza was genuinely invested in his American venture. But cultural historian John Dizikes hypothesized that the manager’s real motivation lay somewhere else entirely.

Dizikes argued that “Gatti-Casazza’s Metropolitan” had to avoid being “identified as an American institution run by foreigners for foreign interests,” noting that “the snobbery which led Americans to favor European names and reputations easily turned into jingoistic xenophobia.”³⁵ Indeed, in his 2011 dissertation, musicologist Davide Ceriani examined the American critics’ “campaign against Gatti-Casazza” and “their concern over the prospect of having an excessively ‘Italianized’ Met.”³⁶ Ceriani asserted that Gatti-Casazza nevertheless “used opera as a means of establishing the superiority of Italian operatic culture over that of the Germans at the Met,” citing the manager’s overwhelming preference for Italian composers and performers during the 1920s and 1930s.³⁷ American composers and performers certainly suffered in this atmosphere; thus, it is possible to view Gatti-Casazza’s efforts as a rather half-hearted foray into American opera.

In any case, Gatti-Casazza’s fourteen American operas proved to have very little staying power. In his 1969 history of the Met, music critic John Briggs included a rather dismal chapter

³⁴ Giulio Gatti-Casazza, *Memories of the Opera* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 237. Quoted in Kirk, *American Opera*, 164 and Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 377. In his memoir, Gatti-Casazza also implied that American operas generally “lacked the necessary measure of genius.” (p. 21)

³⁵ Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 377.

³⁶ Davide Ceriani, “Italianizing the Metropolitan Opera House: Giulio Gatti-Casazza’s Era and the Politics of Opera in New York City, 1908-1935,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 2011, 59.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, iv.

entitled “The Search for the Great American Opera,” noting that “the long, unbroken string of failures at the Metropolitan almost made it seem as if the house were under an evil spell as far as new works were concerned.”³⁸ Pennsylvanian composer Charles Wakefield Cadman’s *Shanewis* stands as a rare exception.³⁹ Premiering on 23 March 1918, *Shanewis* became one of the most successful “Indianist” operas of the early twentieth century.⁴⁰ In *Shanewis*, Cadman and his librettist Nelle Richmond Eberhart told the tragic story of “a beautiful educated Indian girl of musical promise,” who finds herself caught impossibly between two worlds—one white and one Indian.⁴¹ The Met’s 1918 season included five performances of *Shanewis*, and in 1919, the company mounted three more performances. As musicologist Beth E. Levy has pointed out, *Shanewis* was the first American opera “to remain in the repertory beyond a single season” at the Met.⁴² The day after the opera’s premiere, one writer for the *New York Times* proclaimed:

Something like a new Declaration of Independence, as far as concerns American opera or American music of the theatre, native scenic art, home-bred music and singers, was signed,

³⁸ Briggs, *Requiem for a Yellow Brick Brewery*, 137.

³⁹ Scholars who have examined *Shanewis* in detail include Beth E. Levy and Harry D. Perison. See Levy, *Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 87-123 and Perison, “Charles Wakefield Cadman: His Life and Works,” PhD diss., Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester, 1978.

⁴⁰ Other “Indianist” operas include Arthur Nevin’s *Poia* (1907) and Victor Herbert’s *Natoma* (1911). See Michael Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 262. Around this time, composers such as Edward MacDowell and Arthur Farwell were also writing arrangements of Amerindian tunes. Their arrangements, however, were largely instrumental rather than vocal. To cite one prominent example, MacDowell’s *Indian Suite* (1892) was first performed by the Boston Symphony in New York City on 23 January 1896. See Kara Anne Gardner, “Edward MacDowell, Antimodernism, and ‘Playing Indian’ in the ‘Indian Suite,’” *Musical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2004): 370-422. In 1901, Farwell founded the Wa-Wan Press, an American firm of music publishers interested in publishing music based on American folk material. Here, “Indianist” compositions featured prominently. See Levy, “The Wa-Wan and the West” in *Frontier Figures*, 23-55.

⁴¹ Nelle Richmond Eberhart, *Shanewis (The Robin Woman): An Opera* [Libretto] (New York: Fred Rullman, Inc. at the Theatre Ticket Office, 1918), 2. *Shanewis* was a fictional character, but she was largely based on Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone, a singer of Cherokee-Creek descent, with whom Cadman had been collaborating since 1913.

⁴² Levy, *Frontier Figures*, 109. Later, *Shanewis* was staged in cities such as Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles.

sealed, and delivered with the production at the Metropolitan Opera House yesterday afternoon.⁴³

This commentator's words capture that desire, deeply felt by American composers and critics alike, for a distinctive American operatic culture, freed from the European mold. At the same time, it is deeply problematic that this "new Declaration of Independence" was an exoticist one depicting Native Americans.

Connected to the dream of an emancipated American opera were the debates about singing in English that raged throughout the early twentieth century. In the magazine *Opera News*, a publication of the New York Metropolitan Opera Guild, contributors argued back and forth, weighing the pros and cons of European opera sung in English translation. On 17 February 1941, composer and conductor Walter Damrosch and Met general manager Edward Johnson expressed their views on the subject, and over the next few months, *Opera News* printed readers' responses.⁴⁴ For example, on 10 March, W.P. Stephens, "a veteran and enthusiastic opera goer from Long Island" sparred with Bernard Archibald, "a radio listener from the legal profession in the state of Maine."⁴⁵ Stephens argued that opera ought to be sung in its original language; explaining that he had listened to many works in English translation, he complained that such "translations were dead and flat: lacking all charm of the originals."⁴⁶ Archibald advocated opera in English,

⁴³ "Shanewis': Indian Opera, Captivates: Charles W. Cadman's Little Work of Folk Songs is Tuneful and Picturesque," *New York Times*, 24 March 1918. *Shanewis* premiered alongside two other relatively new works: Henry F. Gilbert's *The Dance in Place Congo* and Franco Leoni's *L'Oracolo*.

⁴⁴ See Walter Damrosch and Edward Johnson, "Opera in English: Considerations Past and Present," *Opera News*, 17 February 1941, p. 6-8.

⁴⁵ See W.P. Stephens and Bernard Archibald, "Opera in English," *Opera News*, 10 March 1941, p. 24-25.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

suggesting that “one of the main objects to be attained in opera is to create in as many people as possible a real love of the art of good music in the operatic field.” “How,” Archibald asked, “can this be done if only one out of a thousand can have the remotest idea of what it is all about?”⁴⁷

Comments such as these demonstrate how “ordinary” Americans became invested in the question of opera in the United States. On 10 November 1941, musicologist Sigmund Spaeth joined the discussion, seeking to clarify a few points.⁴⁸ Spaeth asserted that the phrase “opera in English” was misleading, since the real issue was “*translated opera*.”⁴⁹ Pointing, moreover, to the efforts of composers such as Victor Herbert, George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Richard Rogers, and Cole Porter, Spaeth claimed that “plenty” of opera in English already existed.⁵⁰ Spaeth’s mention of Gershwin is significant, for his *Porgy and Bess* marked an important development in American operatic history.

Porgy and Bess opened at the Alvin Theatre on Broadway on 10 October 1935. It is now considered the prime example of American opera, a problematic accolade given the opera’s history and subject matter. George Gershwin composed the music, and DuBose Heyward supplied the libretto, adapting his 1927 play *Porgy*, itself an adaptation of his 1925 novel by the same name.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁸ Sometimes called the “tune detective,” Dr. Sigmund Spaeth became famous across the United States for his claim “that behind the tune of each popular song were roots reaching back to folk music and the classics.” His voice could be heard regularly on the radio; he his own program, “At Home With Music,” and he appeared frequently on the Met’s radio intermission program as well. See “Sigmund Spaeth, Musicologist Called ‘Tune Detective,’ Dies,” *New York Times*, 13 November, 1965.

⁴⁹ Sigmund Spaeth, “Opera in English,” *Opera News*, 10 November 1941, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁵¹ See Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, *Porgy: A Play in Four Acts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1927). Dorothy Heyward was DuBose Heyward’s wife. She collaborated with DuBose on the play adaptation of *Porgy*. See also DuBose Heyward, *Porgy* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925).

Heyward and Ira Gershwin, George Gershwin's brother, wrote the lyrics for the opera. Notably, all three of the authors were white. As musicologist Howard Pollack has pointed out, "the aspect of the novel that initially earned the most praise—its portrayal of Charleston's blacks—became over time its most controversial feature," presenting "the residents of Catfish Row as noble primitives in some ways superior to but still fundamentally different from the white members of the community."⁵² A similar sticking point may be found in Gershwin's music. Dizikes, for example, writes about the "contention" as to "whether *Porgy and Bess* was authentically African American," offering insight from Eva Jessye, who directed the chorus for *Porgy and Bess*.⁵³ Jessye apparently admitted that although Gershwin "was definitely gifted . . . I was black all day and he wasn't . . . of course, his stuff sounds quite white."⁵⁴ In 1967, African American Studies scholar Harold Cruse argued forcefully that "a folk-opera of this genre *should have been written* by Negroes themselves" and that "such a folk-opera, even if it *had been written* by Negroes, would never have been supported, glorified and acclaimed, as *Porgy* has, by the white cultural elite of America."⁵⁵ Thus *Porgy and Bess*'s current status as "the" American opera begs for continued critique.

Central to this dissertation, however, is the initial concern as to whether *Porgy and Bess* truly qualified as an opera, for this concern speaks to the fault lines separating opera and musical

⁵² See Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 571.

⁵³ Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 459.

⁵⁴ Eva Jessye, quoted in *ibid.*, 459. For a portrait of Jessye's life and career, see Peter Seidman, "Eva Jessye," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, 1/2 (1990): 259-263.

⁵⁵ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967), 102-103. Cruse went on to conclude that *Porgy and Bess* "must be criticized from the Negro point of view as the most perfect symbol of the Negro creative artist's cultural denial, degradation, exclusion, exploitation and acceptance of white paternalism."

theater in the United States. On 11 October 1935, music critic Olin Downes complained that Gershwin's style was "at one moment of opera and another of operetta or sheer Broadway entertainment."⁵⁶ Similarly, Virgil Thomson referred to the work derisively as "halfway opera."⁵⁷ On 27 October, Downes reviewed *Porgy and Bess* again, this time conceding that Gershwin had "taken a substantial step, and advanced the cause of native opera."⁵⁸ To some extent, Thomson seemed to come around as well, writing in the journal *Modern Music* in November:

Gershwin does not even know what an opera is; and yet *Porgy and Bess* is an opera and it has power and vigor. Hence it is a more important event in America's artistic life than anything American the Met has ever done."⁵⁹

Gradually Americans became more comfortable with the notion of overlap between musical theater and opera.⁶⁰ Yet prior to World War II, the overlap seemed to go only in one direction; musical theater could gesture toward opera, but opera could not comfortably gesture toward or aspire to be musical theater. Indeed, throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, *Porgy and Bess* remained in the Broadway theater.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Olin Downes, "Exotic Richness of Negro Music and Color of Charleston, S.C., Admirably Conveyed in Score of Catfish Row Tragedy," *New York Times*, 11 October 1935.

⁵⁷ Virgil Thomson, quoted in Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 461.

⁵⁸ Olin Downes, "Roots of Native Opera: Popular Theatre May Prove Forerunner of Genuine American Style," *New York Times*, 27 October 1935.

⁵⁹ Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," *Modern Music* 13 (Nov.-Dec. 1935): 17.

⁶⁰ For example, see Olin Downes, "Broadway's Gift to Opera: 'Oklahoma' Shows One of the Ways to an Integrated and Indigenous Form of American Lyric Theatre," *New York Times*, 6 June 1943.

⁶¹ The New York City Opera produced *Porgy and Bess* in 1962. In 1976, the Houston Grand Opera staged the work, restoring the complete original score for the first time, and finally, in 1985, the Met added *Porgy and Bess* to its repertoire.

History and Literature: American Operatic Culture After World War II

After World War II, the landscape for American opera shifted considerably. The climate of the post-war era and the early Cold War fostered a strong desire to assert cultural independence and superiority in and of the United States, and American opera seems to have benefitted from this nationalistic fervor.⁶² New opera companies such as the New York City Opera (1943), Houston Grand Opera (1955), Santa Fe Opera (1956), Seattle Opera (1963), and Glimmerglass Opera (1975) sprang up across the country; so too did an increasing number of college and community opera programs. These professional, educational, and community institutions generally proved more hospitable to American opera than the Met. At the same time, American opera flourished for a brief moment on Broadway, and some composers found lucrative operatic opportunities on television.⁶³ Thus after World War II, the landscape for opera in and of the United States became more vast and varied than ever before.

In his 1951 appeal *Opera for the People*, Herbert Graf, an Austrian émigré who had become a stage director for the Met during the 1930s, devoted chapters to all the places he saw American opera currently in the making: Broadway, community opera companies, schools, motion pictures, and television.⁶⁴ Broadway was surprisingly welcoming to a number of American operas during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In his 2010 book *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*,

⁶² Indeed, scholars such as Odd Arne Westad have argued that the Cold War “was more about ideas and beliefs than about anything else.” See “Introduction: Reviewing the Cold War,” in *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory*, edited by Odd Arne Westad (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 1. Musicologists including Peter J. Schmelz have demonstrated the importance of this realization in terms of the way we approach music during the Cold War. See “Introduction: Music in the Cold War,” *Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 1 (2009): 3-16.

⁶³ For an examination of opera composed for television, see Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003).

⁶⁴ See Herbert Graf, *Opera for the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1951).

Larry Stempel notes six operas that appeared on Broadway: *Carmen Jones* (1943), *The Medium* (1947), *The Consul* (1950), *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954), *Trouble in Tahiti* (1955), and *Maria Golovin* (1958).⁶⁵ Stempel also lists five Broadway operas: *Porgy and Bess* (1953/1942), *Street Scene* (1947), *Lost in the Stars* (1949), *Regina* (1949/1953), and *West Side Story* (1957), and he asserts that “these works constituted a brief flowering of American stageworks that challenged many of the most cherished notions associated with opera as a highbrow enterprise.”⁶⁶

As is clear from Stempel’s summary, no composer of opera achieved more success on Broadway than Gian-Carlo Menotti who laid claim to *The Medium*, *The Consul*, *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, and *Maria Golovin*. Interestingly, in 1955, Carlisle Floyd looked briefly to Chandler Cowles as he shopped around for a production site for *Susannah* in New York. A family friend, Cowles was also the man responsible for producing *The Consul* on Broadway in 1950. Cowles deemed *Susannah* too dark for the “Great White Way” in 1955. According to Floyd’s biographer Thomas Holliday, Cowles described Floyd’s opera as “so grim, so bleak, unrelieved.”⁶⁷ Holliday himself points out that this was “a strange judgment from a backer of Menotti, whose *Consul* heroine ends by putting her head in a gas oven.”⁶⁸ Thus just five years after *The Consul*’s premiere, Broadway was no longer as hospitable to the genre of opera, demonstrating the fleeting nature of opera on Broadway.

⁶⁵ Larry Stempel, *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 373. See also Christopher Lynch, “Opera and Broadway: The Debate Over the Essence of Opera in New York City, 1900-1960,” PhD diss., State University of New York Buffalo, 2013.

⁶⁶ Stempel, *Showtime*, 373-374. Part of the difference for Stempel between operas on Broadway and Broadway operas had to do with the composer’s conception. Stempel explains, for example, that Menotti’s operas, “while commercially produced on Broadway, were clearly not of Broadway. He conceived of them not in terms of songs or separate musical numbers (as Gershwin ultimately did even with *Porgy and Bess*) but as through-composed music dramas.”

⁶⁷ Chandler Cowles, quoted in Thomas Holliday, *Falling Up: The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd, The Authorized Biography, With a Foreword by Plácido Domingo* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 131.

⁶⁸ Holliday, *Falling Up*, 131.

Indeed, in 1974, soprano Patricia Neway recalled that “1950 was a very special time in the Broadway scene,” going on to argue that *The Consul* simply “could not happen today.”⁶⁹

Yet there were other places for American composers of opera to turn. In *Opera for the People*, Graf emphasized that “the growth of a truly American opera” was being “fostered in decisive fashion by the development of music schools throughout the country.”⁷⁰ Asserting that many of these music schools were a byproduct of World War II, he noted how by the end of the war, the number of music schools in the United States had risen tremendously.⁷¹ One of the most important schools, at least in terms of the development of American opera, was Columbia University.

The Music Department at Columbia began championing opera shortly after American composer Douglas Moore (1893-1969), who had been on the Music Department faculty since 1926, became Chair of the Department in 1940. That same year, Moore began publically advocating that contemporary opera move into the university. Frustrated by the reality that the American opera house (meaning the Met) had “dedicated” itself “to the greatness of the past,” Moore suggested a new way forward in a 1940 essay in *Modern Music*.⁷² “If the opera house must continue to be a museum and the movies and theatre to be timid,” he wrote, “there is one more possible field for experimentation in opera, our schools, universities, and conservatories.”⁷³ Moore

⁶⁹ Neway, interview with Gruen.

⁷⁰ Graf, *Opera for the People*, 187.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 187. Graf wrote that by the end of World War II, “the number of music schools in the United States had risen from fewer than twenty-five to some three hundred.”

⁷² Douglass Moore, “Our Lyric Theatre,” *Modern Music* XVIII, no. 1 (November-December 1940): 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 6.

noted that opera departments at Juilliard, Curtis, and Eastman had already begun to make progress, “experiment[ing] to some extent with productions of operas by contemporary Europeans and Americans.”⁷⁴ Thus, during the early 1940s, he worked to make Columbia a similarly hospitable institution.

Under Moore’s guidance, Columbia’s operatic ventures featured neglected operas of the past and new works. These included English translations of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi’s *The Music Master* and *The Jealous Husband*, Johann Schenk’s *The Village Barber*, André Grétry’s *The Two Misers*, and Giovanni Paisiello’s *The Barber of Seville*.⁷⁵ In terms of new works, there was Benjamin Britten’s *Paul Bunyan* (1941), Ernst Bacon’s *A Tree on the Plains* (1942), Normand Lockwood’s *The Scarecrow* (1945), Menotti’s *The Medium* (1946), Thomson’s *The Mother of Us All* (1947), Otto Luening’s *Evangeline* (1948), Jan Meyerowitz’s *The Barrier* (1950), and Moore’s own *Giants in the Earth* (1951).⁷⁶

In April 1945, Moore contributed an article to *Opera News* in which he boasted about Columbia’s recent operatic activities:

Opera at Columbia is small scale, experimental, and not a bit grand but it is opera, it is American, and it is exciting because its concern is with the future.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid., 6. The Juilliard Opera Center, however, was not established until 1970. They presented Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* to celebrate the opening of the Juilliard Theater at Lincoln Center that year.

⁷⁵ Programs for these productions can be found in the archival collection of the Columbia Theater Associates, 1893-1958, housed in Columbia University’s Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

⁷⁶ Similarly, programs for these productions can also be found in the archival collection of the Columbia Theater Associates, 1893-1958, housed in Columbia University’s Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

⁷⁷ Douglass Moore, “Opera Productions at Columbia University,” *Opera News*, 16 April 1945, p. 13.

Moore singled out the Alice M. Ditson Fund and the Opera Workshop, both of which, he asserted, were helping to further American opera at Columbia and beyond. Established in 1940 with a bequest of \$400,000 from Alice M. Ditson, widow of Boston music publisher Oliver Ditson, the Alice M. Ditson Fund supported an annual commission of “an American composer and librettist for an opera designed for production at [Columbia’s] Brander Matthews Hall,” Moore explained.⁷⁸ He pointed out that “American operas generally have been regarded with a fishy eye by the public and by the critics.”⁷⁹ Admitting that there would be no magical or instantaneous solution to this dismal state of affairs, he argued “we can hardly expect a full blown masterpiece to roll along until there has been a lot of trail blazing along the road.”⁸⁰ Thus Moore identified his “trail blazing” mission at Columbia. One particularly successful result of Ditson funding was Menotti’s *The Medium*. After its commission and premiere at Columbia in 1946, *The Medium* went on to play for six months at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway.⁸¹ Thus Columbia did help to further the cause of American opera, on its own campus and beyond. After *The Medium*, Columbia awarded Ditson funding to the commission and premiere of Thomson and Stein’s *The Mother of Us All*. While this opera did not amount to the same commercial and popular success as *The Medium*, it was later revived, as I discuss in the following interlude, by the Santa Fe

⁷⁸ Ibid., 13. See also The Alice M. Ditson Fund Website: <https://ditsonfund.org/alice-m-ditson-fund> (accessed 30 April 2017).

⁷⁹ Moore, “Opera Productions at Columbia University,” 13.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁸¹ See Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Telephone/The Medium*, May 1, 1947-November 1, 1947, Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, NY, Internet Broadway Database (IBDB), accessed 30 April 2017.

Opera (1976), and then by the New York City Opera (2000), the San Francisco Opera (2003), and the Manhattan School of Music (2013).

Along with the Ditson Fund, Columbia's Opera Workshop (organized in 1943) also played an important role. Led primarily by stage director Herbert Graf, music director Williard Rhodes, and conductor Otto Luening, the Opera Workshop provided a training ground of sorts for not-yet-established performers, composers, and librettists.⁸² In 1951, Graf asserted that "such a workshop is really a little experimental opera theater, designed to fill the gap that exists in America between school training and engagements with major professional companies."⁸³ He continued: "In this respect, opera workshops are the American substitutes for the Middle European 'Stadtheaters.'"⁸⁴ Luening spoke similarly of the Brander Matthews Theatre operation as a whole, explaining:

Smith [Milton Smith, director of Columbia's School of Dramatic Arts] ran Brander Matthews like a provincial German repertory theater, with a training school for theater and the opera workshop. The theater school taught everything that was needed to put on a show: building scenery, acting, making costumes, stage designing, running the box office, painting posters, and tending to publicity. The opera department did not provide voice lessons, but concentrated on stage action, body movement, and the production of scenes and entire operas – some with piano accompaniment and some completely mounted with costumes, scenery, and costumes.⁸⁵

⁸² Moore, "Opera Productions at Columbia University," 12.

⁸³ Graf, *Opera for the People*, 187.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁸⁵ Otto Luening, *The Odyssey of an American Composer: The Autobiography of Otto Luening* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), 457-458.

In addition to providing rigorous training, the Opera Workshop appears to have helped to impart Columbia's values. The American conductor John Crosby (1926-2002), who went on to found the Santa Fe Opera in 1956, participated in the Opera Workshop in 1952 and 1953.⁸⁶

Like Columbia, the Santa Fe Opera demonstrated a commitment to rigorous training and a decided interest in new works, particularly those by American composers. In their first season (1957), the company produced Marvin David Levy's *The Tower*. The following year, they commissioned and premiered Carlisle Floyd's *Wuthering Heights*. Santa Fe maintains its commitment to American composers to this day. In 2015, for example, the company unveiled Jennifer Higdon's first opera *Cold Mountain*, based on Charles Frazier's 1997 book by the same title.⁸⁷ The following year, they revived Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* (1958), and in 2017, they plan to premiere Mason Bates's *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*. The Santa Fe Opera occupies pride of place among the United States' summer opera festivals, rivaled only perhaps by the Glimmerglass Festival, founded in 1975 just outside Cooperstown, New York.

The Santa Fe Opera, however, was hardly the only new professional company to emerge and flourish just after World War II. Most important to the development of American opera during this era was the New York City Opera (NYCO). In fact, *The Mother of Us All*, *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* all made their way onto the NYCO's stage at one point or another. Founded in 1943, the NYCO might be considered a late result of progressive politics and New

⁸⁶ See Craig A. Smith, *A Vision of Voices: John Crosby and the Santa Fe Opera* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 32.

⁸⁷ See Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997). Musicologist Christina Reitz is currently working on a book on Jennifer Higdon, including discussion of her operatic adaptation of Frazier's book. Reitz gave a paper on the history and genesis of Higdon's *Cold Mountain* at the 2016 meeting of the College Music Society entitled "The Transformative Elements of Higdon's *Cold Mountain*."

Deal culture, according to Dizikes.⁸⁸ Martin L. Sokol documented the early history of the NYCO in his 1981 monograph *The New York City Opera: An American Adventure*. As Sokol writes, the NYCO began when New York City mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia lent his name and support to a campaign spearheaded by Morton Baum and Newbold Morris to “meet a demand for cultural entertainment at popular prices.”⁸⁹ The NYCO quickly earned the moniker “the people’s opera,” and in the post-war era, the company increasingly functioned as the American people’s opera, providing greater opportunities to American singers and composers as well as to audiences.⁹⁰

In the spring of 1949, the NYCO presented their first American premiere, mounting three performances of William Grant Still’s *Troubled Island*.⁹¹ As Still’s librettist Langston Hughes proudly pointed out, *Troubled Island* marked “the first time that an opera written entirely by Negroes has been given a major presentation by any organized opera company in the United States.”⁹² A historical drama, *Troubled Island* loosely chronicles the life of Haitian Revolutionary,

⁸⁸ Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 469.

⁸⁹ Statement released by La Guardia to the press, 21 July 1943, quoted in Martin L. Sokol, *The New York City Opera: An American Adventure* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 11.

⁹⁰ The NYCO is often contrasted with the Met. As Paul Griffiths notes, the Met was not known for being especially friendly to American composers: “the American operas that did get staged soon lapsed from the repertory.” See Paul Griffiths, “The Twentieth Century: To 1945” in Roger Parker, ed., *The Oxford History of Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 209. From 1945-1960, the Met staged just one American opera: Samuel Barber’s *Vanessa* (1958). Regarding opportunities for American singers at the Met, Sokol points out that during the early twentieth century, “the roster of Met soloists remained overwhelmingly European or European-trained.” See Sokol, *The New York City Opera*, 30.

⁹¹ Several scholars have examined *Troubled Island*, most notably Tammy Kernodle and Catherine Parsons Smith. See Kernodle, “Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still’s ‘Troubled Island,’” *The Musical Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (1999): 487-508; Smith, “‘Harlem Renaissance Man’ Revisited: The Politics of Race and Class in William Grant Still’s Late Career,” *American Music* 15, no. 3 (1997): 381-406. See also Beverly Soll, *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005) and Bonnie Cutsforth-Huber, “The Operas of William Grant Still,” PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2004.

⁹² Langston Hughes, “‘Troubled Island:’ The Story of How an Opera Was Created,” *Chicago Defender*, 26 March 1949.

Jean-Jacques Dessalines.⁹³ On 31 March 1949, baritone Robert Weede sang the role of Dessalines, while contralto Marie Powers took the part of Azelia, Dessalines's faithful wife.⁹⁴ The only African American singer initially assigned a named role was Robert McFerrin, cast as Papaloi, a voodoo priest.⁹⁵ Lawrence Winters, however, took over the role of Dessalines in the final two performances of the opera.⁹⁶ Thus six years before Marian Anderson would make her debut at the Met, singing the role of Ulrica in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* and marking the first time an African American singer sang on the Met's stage, the NYCO integrated both its stage and repertoire.⁹⁷ *Troubled Island*, however, was hardly an unqualified victory for Still, the NYCO, or racial integration. After its contracted three performances (31 March, 10 April, and 1 May), *Troubled Island* was never again

⁹³ Born into slavery, Jean-Jacques Dessalines fought for Haiti's freedom in 1791. He rose through the military ranks and eventually declared himself Emperor of Haiti; he was later murdered by his own people, a consequence of both his ruthless tyranny and the racial divisions among Haitians.

⁹⁴ Robert Weede (1903-1972) made his Metropolitan Opera debut in 1937 as "Tonio" in *Pagliacci*. He continued to sing opera, particularly in New York and San Francisco throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Weede also made some successful forays into Broadway. For example, in 1956, he played "Tony" in Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*. See William A. Everett and Lee Snook, "Weede, Robert," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 30 April 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/49490>. Marie Powers (1910-1973) was especially known for her performances in Gian-Carlo Menotti's music dramas. Elizabeth Forbes writes: "A very effective actress with a strong, deep-toned voice, she will always be associated with *The Medium*, in which she played the role of Baba both on Broadway and in the film version." See Elizabeth Forbes, "Powers, Marie," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 30 April 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O002724>.

⁹⁵ In 1955, McFerrin became the first black male to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. See "Robert McFerrin Sr., 85, Operatic Baritone at Met," *New York Times*, 28 November 2006.

⁹⁶ Lawrence Winters (1915-1965) was one of the first African Americans to "sign a season contract with an American opera company," according to his obituary in the *New York Amsterdam News*. It seems Winters began his career singing with the Eva Jessye Choir. A member of the chorus in *Porgy and Bess* and an understudy to Todd Duncan, Winters eventually replaced Duncan as 'Porgy' for "three performances a week for nearly two years." He went on to sing the role of Dessalines in both Clarence Cameron White's *Ouanga!* and Still's *Troubled Island*. Winters appeared on Broadway in *My Darlin' Aida* as well as two revivals of *Show Boat*. See "Lawrence Winters Buried in Germany," *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 October 1965.

⁹⁷ In fact, the NYCO had already featured an African American singer on stage. In 1945, baritone Todd Duncan sang the role of Tonio in *I Pagliacci*. As Dizikes writes "a decade before any other American opera company consulted its racial conscience (if any), the City Opera had acted." See *Opera in America*, 488.

staged in its entirety during Still's lifetime, a circumstance that caused Still (and his family) great distress.⁹⁸

Following *Troubled Island*, the NYCO continued to present American works including David Tamkin's *The Dybbuk* in 1951, Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and *The Consul*, both in 1952, Blitzstein's *Regina* in 1953, Copland's *The Tender Land* in 1954, and Floyd's *Susannah* in 1956. Many of these operas ultimately contributed to the formation of a canon of American opera. In addition, in 1957, the Ford Foundation gave \$105,000.00 to the NYCO (\$910,260.00 in 2017), sponsoring an entire season of American opera the following year.⁹⁹ The American season was popular enough that a second season of American opera was presented in 1959-1960.¹⁰⁰ The Ford Foundation thus helped to cement the NYCO's reputation, in the words of Dizikes, as "the most American of opera companies."¹⁰¹ The NYCO maintained this reputation well into the twenty-first century. The company filed for bankruptcy in 2013, however, and although a nonprofit group called the NYCO Renaissance announced a revival plan in 2016, it is far too early to speculate on its success.

⁹⁸ Still eventually came to believe that a conspiracy crafted by white music critics with communist sympathies was responsible for *Troubled Island's* apparent failure. See Smith, "Harlem Renaissance Man" Revisited," 386. Examining the alleged plot during the 1990s, Smith and Kernodle concluded that evidence simply did not support a critical conspiracy.

⁹⁹ Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 488.

¹⁰⁰ Tedrin Blair Lindsay examines the collaboration between the NYCO and the Ford Foundation in his 2009 dissertation. See "The Coming of Age of American Opera: New York City Opera and the Ford Foundation, 1958-1960," PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2009.

¹⁰¹ Dizikes, *Opera in America*, 489.

American Opera in the Context of the Cold War

American operas like *The Mother of Us All*, *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* have long been ignored by musicologists. This is unfortunate because as basically tonal works, these operas—along with plenty of symphonies and string quartets—complicate a favorite yet overly simplified narrative about so-called “serious” music composition during the early Cold War: that university-employed composers turned away from tonality and from their audiences, retreating into the ivory towers of academia.¹⁰² When studying the academic institutionalization of new music, musicologists have tended to focus squarely on Milton Babbitt’s position as Professor of Composition at Princeton University, as well as his now notorious essay of 1958, “Who Cares If You Listen?” (originally entitled “The Composer as Specialist”).¹⁰³ As Richard Taruskin notes, Babbitt’s purpose was “to convince the academic community (and his own university’s administration in particular) that the most advanced music composition had reached the point where it deserved recognition as a type of scholarly or scientific research.”¹⁰⁴ Taruskin also highlights the political significance of Babbitt’s alignment with science:

¹⁰² For a broad discussion of classical music during these years, see Richard Crawford, “Classical Music in the Postwar Years” in *America’s Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 689-713.

¹⁰³ See Milton Babbitt, “Who Cares If You Listen?” *High Fidelity* 8, no. 2 (1958): 38-40, 126-127. In 1991, Babbitt recalled how “Who Cares” came to be published in *High Fidelity*: “The talk [on the “unreal world of the contemporary composer,” delivered at Tanglewood in the 1950s] was overheard by the editor of a magazine impredicatively entitled *High Fidelity*. He asked me to write it for publication; I resisted, he insisted, I capitulated, coward that I was and still am. My title was “The Composer as Specialist,” not thereby identifying that role of the composer in which he necessarily reveled, but in which, necessarily, he found himself. The editor, without my knowledge and —therefore—my consent or assent, replaced my title by the more “provocative” one: “Who Care if You Listen?” a title which reflects little of the letter and nothing of the spirit of the article. For all that the true source of that offensively vulgar title has been revealed many times, in many ways, even—eventually—by the offending journal itself, I still am far more likely to be known as the author of “Who Cares if You Listen?” than as the composer of music to which you may or may not care to listen.” See Milton Babbitt, *A Life of Learning, Charles Homer Haskins Lecture*. American Council of Learned Societies: ACLS Occasional Paper, no. 17 (1991), 15.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Taruskin, “Afterword: *Nicht blutbefleckt?*” *Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 275. Somewhat similarly, Brian Harker suggests that we view “Who Cares If You Listen?” as “a landmark artifact in the long struggle by

Rivalry with the Soviet Union in the era of the superpowers, after science had vouchsafed the decisive Allied victory in World War II, was what gave science the measure of glamour in the late 50s and 60s that it took to (among many other things) persuade Princeton to authorize a research degree for musical composition.¹⁰⁵

He then concludes: “That the music recognized by that degree would be twelve-tone music went at first without saying.”¹⁰⁶ This may have gone “without saying” at Princeton, but this was not necessarily the case at other universities.¹⁰⁷

By expanding our understanding of what Taruskin terms “the most advanced music composition,” we can see other aspects of new music’s institutionalization in the American university. Beeson spent much of his career at Columbia University, whereas Floyd divided his time between Florida State University and the University of Houston. Many American operas that continued in the tradition of nineteenth-century tonality, including *The Mother of Us All* and *Susannah*, premiered on university campuses. While Menotti’s *The Consul* did not, several of the composer’s other operas did.¹⁰⁸ Thus American operas found a home in the American university during the Cold War, and there many have remained. *The Mother of Us All*, *The Consul*, *Susannah*,

university musicians for respect and dignity vis-à-vis their esteemed colleagues in other fields.” See “Milton Babbitt Encounters Academia (And Vice Versa),” *American Music* 26, no. 3 (2008): 367.

¹⁰⁵ Taruskin, “Afterword,” 276.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁰⁷ For more on this issue, see Joseph N. Straus, “The Myth of Serial ‘Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s,” *The Musical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (1999): 301-343. See also Anne C. Shreffler, “The Myth of Empirical Historiography: A Response to Joseph N. Straus,” *The Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000): 30-39.

¹⁰⁸ In 1937, the Curtis Institute of Music gave the premiere of Menotti’s first opera, *Amelia Goes to the Ball*. Columbia University premiered Menotti’s *The Medium* in 1946. The composer’s *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1939), *The Telephone* (1947), and *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951), although they did not premiere on university campuses, remain popular there to this day.

and other mid-century works continue to thrive primarily in college and university productions.¹⁰⁹ During his lectures at the University of Wisconsin in the fall of 1983, Babbitt praised universities as “the havens for—and the patrons of—serious musical activity in all of its manifestations.”¹¹⁰ I contend that it is more than time that mid-century American opera be recognized as one “of its manifestations.” By recognizing the contributions of Thomson, Menotti, Floyd, and Beeson, musicologists may achieve a more nuanced understanding of the varied nature of music composition and performance in and around academia during the Cold War.

Importantly, American opera was also unprecedentedly popular during the Cold War. It made an impact on its viewers. Thus lurking behind this dissertation is the question of why American opera was so popular during the early Cold War. The answer to this question, I believe, lies not only in the music and politics on display in these works but in the women they featured. I maintain that the women in and of American opera made the genre compelling. To be sure, women have long played a central role in European opera as well. During the 1950s and 1960s, American composers drew on this longstanding tradition, creating works that revolved around women and women’s voices. Yet there is something distinctive about the women in mid-century American opera and in *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* in particular. They were designed—initially by men—to fight back against their situations and against operatic conventions. They sought to carve out a space for themselves operatically at the same time that women in the United States actively engaged in a similar mission.

¹⁰⁹ To date, *Lizzie Borden* has not made many inroads in terms of campus productions. As I explain in Chapter 2, however, this could change. In 2013, the Boston Lyric Opera premiered a chamber-version of *Lizzie Borden*, potentially making the opera less formidable to college opera theater programs.

¹¹⁰ Milton Babbitt, “The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music” in *Milton Babbitt: Words About Music*, edited by Stephen Dembski and Joseph N. Straus (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 164.

The heroines of *The Consul*, *Susannah*, and *Lizzie Borden* are all the more compelling because in different ways, they exerted influence. When *The Consul* opened on Broadway, it played six nights a week for eight months, an achievement that is almost unfathomable today. Neither *Susannah* nor *Lizzie Borden* was as commercially successful as *The Consul*, yet in terms of the world of American opera, both did surprisingly well, and to this day, *Susannah* remains the third-most performed American opera in North America, following Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.¹¹¹ *Susannah*, moreover, has garnered an impressive following of sopranos since Phyllis Curtin; over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these women have interpreted *Susannah*'s struggle, absorbed it, made it their own, and actively intervened on the opera's meaning as a whole. *Lizzie Borden* was also poised to make an impact. Inspired by both a historical figure and well-worn legend, *Lizzie Borden* intersects with other historical and fictional accounts of the Fall River murders, yet as an opera, *Lizzie Borden* reignited interest in female madness, violence, and feminism, particularly with respect to this infamous legend. As a musicologist, I am fascinated by the way in which American sopranos used male-generated operatic constructions to make space for themselves. Thus in the following pages of this dissertation, I investigate and prioritize the stories of the women in and of American opera, because together, these real and fictional women give us fresh insight into the genre of opera, the culture of the Cold War, the advent of modern feminism, and the way these subjects collided with and informed one another.

¹¹¹ See the most recent performance statistics (2009) provided by the service Opera America. North American Works Directory, Opera America <http://www.operaamerica.org/applications/NAWD/index.aspx> (accessed 17 March 2017).

A SHORT PREQUEL

The Operatic Life of Susan B. Anthony: Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All*

“When she chose Susan B. as her protagonist, I could not deny her the feminist approach.”
—Virgil Thomson (1966)¹¹²

In 1945, as World War II finally drew to a close, Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein began working on an opera. The pair had collaborated before; their *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927-28), featuring twenty-plus saints, four acts, all-black cast, cellophane costumes, and plotless, indeed outright puzzling libretto, had suggested an exciting way forward in the realm of avant-garde opera when it opened on Broadway in 1934.¹¹³ Thomson and Stein's second opera, ultimately titled *The Mother of Us All*, represented a very different yet nevertheless radical undertaking. As Maurice Grosser explained in the scenario that prefaced the published score:

The Mother of Us All is a pageant. Its theme is the winning in the United States of political rights for women. Its story is the life and career of Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906).¹¹⁴

If in the 1940s, the theme of women's suffrage was still rather radical in and of itself, so too was the librettist's approach to it. As Stein scholar Jane Palatini Bowers has carefully documented, Stein quoted heavily from actual political speeches including those by Daniel Webster (1782-

¹¹² Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 366.

¹¹³ On *Four Saints in Three Acts*, see Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York: Random House, 1998); Nadine Hubbs, “Modernist Abstraction and the Abstract Art: *Four Saints* and the Queer Composition of America's Sound” in *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 19-63; Corinne E. Blackmer, “The Ecstasies of Saint Teresa: The Saint as Queer Diva from Crashaw to *Four Saints in Three Acts*,” in *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*, edited by Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 306-347.

¹¹⁴ Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein, *The Mother of Us All, Together with the Scenario by Maurice Grosser, Piano-Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1947), 11. Maurice Grosser was a painter and Thomson's life partner. He wrote the scenarios for both *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All*.

1852), using numerous “male-generated texts” but ultimately telling an “antipatriarchal” story.¹¹⁵ Bowers argues that Stein’s revisions of these texts tell not only Susan B. Anthony’s story but also Stein’s story, “reenact[ing] her renunciation of procreation in favor of creation and her definition of herself as a peer of Picasso and Joyce, and co-creator with them of modernism.”¹¹⁶ Stein’s (and as I will argue, also Thomson’s) take on Susan B. Anthony, however personal, is all the more political when considered within the context of the days that followed World War II, as many American women endured pressure to return to the home and to the role of housewife and mother. Framed in this light, Susan B. (as she is referred to in the opera) emerges as a pensive and ironic heroine-commentator on the achievements of the Women’s Suffrage Movement and an advocate for continued struggle and action in the Cold War era.

Stein scholars have conducted most of the research on *The Mother of Us All* to date, and they have tended to focus squarely on Stein’s libretto and perspective. Thus although operas are typically associated with their composers rather than their librettists, in the case of *The Mother of Us All*, the situation is reversed. As Thomson’s biographer Anthony Tommasini has summarized, “the Thomson/Stein collaborations, however ingenious,” have been “primarily of literary importance and not musical masterpieces.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, Stein’s status in American letters overshadows Thomson’s status in American music, challenging the usual authority of the composer-librettist

¹¹⁵ Jane Palatini Bowers, *“They Watch Me as They Watch This”: Gertrude Stein’s Metadrama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 99.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹¹⁷ Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 399. Corinne E. Blackmer, on the other hand, has pointed out how “‘canonical’ operas . . . almost invariably intersected tragic heterosexual love with various political, nationalistic, or cultural conflicts,” a construction lacking in both *Four Saints* and *The Mother of Us All*. This may also serve to explain their oversight in the musicological literature. See Blackmer, “The Ecstasies of Saint Teresa: The Saint as Queer Diva from Crashaw to *Four Saints in Three Acts*,” 327.

dynamic. In the following pages, I seek to shift the discussion surrounding *The Mother of Us All* by attending to Thomson's contributions. At first glance, this may seem a regressive move, an attempt to reassert the authority of the composer's voice. Yet this is not my intent. I am interested in Thomson's perspective because in the case of *The Mother of Us All*, he asserted more than the composer's voice. Following Stein's sudden death on 27 July 1946, Thomson tasked himself with revising her libretto as he set about composing his music.¹¹⁸ As a result, *The Mother of Us All*, the opera, differs from *The Mother of Us All*, the play, revealing both a tension and collaboration of authorial voice that has been lost in previous discussions that conflate the play and opera. Although Stein scholars such as Bowers emphasize how Stein was working to revise and resist patriarchal authority, Thomson took over some of that revision and resistance as he molded the libretto from her play into his opera text.

Ultimately, I argue that Thomson bought into parts of Stein's feminist project, and I read his contributions to *The Mother of Us All* as his attempt to fashion himself as Stein's political and artistic partner. It was Thomson, for example, who inserted both Stein and himself more fully into the opera libretto, expanding the roles of the characters Gertrude S. and Virgil T. and creating a partnership between them to mirror the collaboration between Susan B. and her partner Anne within the world of the opera. Drawing from both versions of the libretto text, as well as from the musical score, I show how *The Mother of Us All* established a complexity and multiplicity of authorial voice and a pairing of nationalism and burgeoning feminism that would continue to inform operatic creation, performance, and reception in the United States over the course of the

¹¹⁸ Stein died from stomach cancer at the age of seventy-two. See "Gertrude Stein Dies In France, 72," *Wireless to The New York Times*, 28 July 1946. For a biography of Stein, see Janet Hobhouse, *Everybody Who Was Anybody: A Biography of Gertrude Stein* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975).

next two decades. *The Mother of Us All* offers an important point of entry to these decades, moreover, because the year of its premiere, 1947, is often regarded as marking the beginning of the Cold War.¹¹⁹

The Mother of Us All loosely chronicles the life and work of Susan B. Anthony, highlighting Anthony's activities as an activist for women's suffrage, her ambivalence regarding the institution of marriage, and her concerns regarding her legacy. The opera features a veritable parade of characters, real and imagined, who flaunt all sense of linear chronology. Most importantly, there is Susan B. (1820-1906), her friend Anne (perhaps inspired by suffragette Anna Howard Shaw (1847-1919) who lived and worked with Anthony for a time), Daniel Webster (1782-1852), Anthony Comstock (1844-1915), John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868), Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885), and Andrew Johnson (1808-1875). In addition to Susan B., the politicians, and the statesmen, there are a number of people from outside the world of politics: the librettist herself, Gertrude S. (1874-1946), the composer himself, Virgil T. (1896-1989), the actress Lillian Russell (1860-1922), and the literary bibliographer Donald Gallup (1913-2000), who was a close friend of Stein's.¹²⁰ The opera revolves around Susan B. as she debates Daniel Webster, struggles to assert her voice and her cause, and then ponders the results of her activism.

¹¹⁹ On 12 March 1947, approximately two months before *The Mother of Us All* opened at Columbia University, President Harry S. Truman announced his plan to counter Soviet geopolitical expansion in Greece and Turkey, now known as the Truman Doctrine and often regarded as the beginning of the Cold War proper. See Elizabeth Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006). See also Martin McCauley, *The Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1949, Third Edition* (London: Pearson, 2003).

¹²⁰ Donald Gallup met Stein in Paris. He was apparently one of the GIs to whom Stein took a liking. Gallup convinced Stein to send her papers to Yale University, where Gallup was to be employed after the war, first as a librarian and then as a curator. He went on to spend more than 30 years as a curator in the Yale Collection of American Literature. See William H. Honan, "Donald Gallup Dies at 87; Bibliographer of T.S. Eliot," *New York Times*, September 10, 2000.

The Mother of Us All was made possible through a commission from the Alice M. Ditson fund at Columbia University. Together, Thomson and Stein received \$1,500.00 (\$16,844.00 in 2017); Thomson took \$1,000.00 and Stein took \$500.00.¹²¹ According to composer Otto Luening, director of Columbia's opera productions and a Ditson Committee member, the committee "wanted to commission [Aaron] Copland to write an opera, but he was busy."¹²² As Luening recalled:

I suggested Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein. They accepted. (It turned out to be Stein's last important work, finished in February 1946.) Virgil immediately got busy and by Christmas 1946 he presented us with *The Mother of Us All*.¹²³

Thomson suggested a similarly efficient, albeit certainly exaggerated timeline for genesis and composition in his 1966 autobiography:

When I asked [Stein] for an opera about nineteenth-century America, with perhaps the language of the senatorial orators quoted, she hardly thought at all, just started writing. She must have looked into a book or two, just the same, for the political-meeting scene, which she wrote first, has quotes in it (distorted, of course) from the addresses of both Daniel Webster and Susan B. Anthony.¹²⁴

Thomson and Stein had actually already considered writing an opera invoking American history. As Thomson recalled, before he and Stein settled on saints as the subject of their first opera, they tried out various American historical themes, ultimately without success. Thomson explained, for example, that he "vetoed George Washington because of eighteenth-century costumes (in which

¹²¹ Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 381.

¹²² Otto Luening, *The Odyssey of an American Composer: The Autobiography of Otto Luening* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), 461. Luening, a composer in his own right, was appointed director of opera productions at Columbia in 1944. In 1948, he conducted his own opera, *Evangeline*, at Columbia.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 461-462.

¹²⁴ Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 365-366.

everybody looks alike).¹²⁵ Thus it was perhaps rather fitting that the pair found their way into American history with their second and final collaboration.

Despite its debt to that history, *The Mother of Us All* was decidedly situated in its present location and moment, which shifted between New York and Paris during the final days of World War II. Composer Rodney Lister, one of the few people to write about *The Mother of Us All* from a musical standpoint, has explained that Douglas Moore, Chair of the Music Department at Columbia and member of the Ditson Committee, specifically requested to Thomson “that there be no ensembles, since the war was making it difficult to recruit singers for a chorus.”¹²⁶ According to Lister, Moore noted that women were more “plentiful” than men.¹²⁷ As Moore was particularly invested in securing a place for American opera within the American university system—he had been using Columbia’s opera program to set an example since the early 1940s—he asked that Thomson and Stein make the opera “suitable for performance widely in the colleges.”¹²⁸ College performance priorities will continue to figure prominently in the following pages of this dissertation, as both *The Consul* and *Susannah* are popular college operas. Indeed, such priorities reflect Moore’s awareness of the impact of World War II at home and his looking ahead to the future, at least in terms of opera in the United States.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹²⁶ Rodney Lister, “Another Completely Interesting Opera: ‘The Mother of Us All’ Part I: History and Background,” *Tempo* 64, no. 253 (2010): 3. Lister found this letter in Virgil Thomson’s Papers at the Yale University Music Library. When I examined Thomson’s Papers, I was unable to locate it. See also Rodney Lister, “Another Completely Interesting Opera: ‘The Mother of Us All’ Part 2,” *Tempo* 65 (2011): 9-17.

¹²⁷ Lister, “Another Completely Interesting Opera,” 3.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 3. On Douglas Moore’s efforts to establish American opera within the American university and to use Columbia University as a model, see Douglas Moore, “Our Lyric Theatre,” *Modern Music* XVIII, no. 1 (November-December 1940): 3-7; “Opera Productions at Columbia University,” *Opera News* April 16, 1945, p. 13.

Stein, however, was not in the United States. She had been living in Paris since 1903, where she remained busy writing and hosting a salon frequented by writers, composers, and artists such as Hemingway, Thomson, and Picasso.¹²⁹ According to Thomson, Stein reinvested heavily in American culture during the 1940s. As the composer recalled in 1966:

Every day, as she walked her dog, she picked up dozens [of GIs], asked them questions, took them home, fed them cake and whiskey, observed their language. Its sound and grammar had at this time already been put into a book called *Brewsie and Willie*.¹³⁰

First published in 1946, *Brewsie and Willie* is a short, colorful volume of fast-paced banter between two GIs.¹³¹ Sometimes light-hearted and humorous, the book also confronts the issue of post-war order and identity as the GIs discuss the problems they will face when they return to the United States.¹³² Intriguingly, *Brewsie and Willie* concludes with a coda from Stein herself entitled “To Americans.” Stein’s biographer Janet Hobhouse refers to this address as “a unique passage of patriotic near-hysteria,” for Stein concludes with a lengthy admonishment, begging her readers to come to terms with the Great Depression, to be wary of communism and socialism, to accept their global responsibilities and above all, to remember that “we are Americans.”¹³³ If with *Brewsie and*

¹²⁹ Stein did return to the United States for a year in the mid-1930s. However, she then immediately went back to France.

¹³⁰ Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 365.

¹³¹ See Gertrude Stein, *Brewsie and Willie* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1946).

¹³² *Brewsie and Willie* discuss the legacy of the American Civil War, the Great Depression, and the impacts of industrialism. They also broach topics such as racism and sexism. For example, a character named Brock remarks to *Brewsie and Willie* that “the other day I heard a colored major say, he had no children although he was married nine year and I said, how is that, and he said, is this America any place to make born a Negro child.” See Stein, *Brewsie and Willie*, 12.

¹³³ Hobhouse, *Everybody Who Was Anybody*, 228. Stein begins her address as follows: “G.I.s and G.I.s and G.I.s and they have made me come all over patriotic. I was always patriotic, I was always in my way a Civil War veteran, but in between, there were other things, but now there are no other things. And I am sure that this particular moment in our history is more important than anything since the Civil War.” See *Brewsie and Willie*, 113.

Willie Stein demonstrated her concern for the United States' status in an increasingly global arena, in *The Mother of Us All*, she addressed the status of American women at home.¹³⁴

In 1945, the status of women in the United States was up for debate. As historian Elaine Tyler May has compellingly demonstrated, Americans during the post-war era were encouraged to pursue marriage, parenthood, and traditional gender roles.¹³⁵ In fact, as early as 1944, J. Edgar Hoover was asserting that a mother's "patriotic duty is not on the factory front. It is on the home front!"¹³⁶ As the Cold War set in, the American family became an increasingly political construction, one that confined women's roles supposedly for the health and safety of the nation, indeed, as a way to keep communism at bay.¹³⁷ Thus as Stein pondered the achievements of Women's Suffrage, ultimately choosing *not* to bring her libretto for *The Mother of Us All* to an unequivocally rousing conclusion in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, she suggested an unfinished struggle. At the end of the opera, Susan B. Anthony, now deceased, addresses her newly enfranchised constituency from behind a marble statue of herself. As Stein scholar Franziska Gygas so trenchantly points out:

Anthony's voice behind the statue no longer expresses protest against male oppression, but it does not convey satisfaction either. Doubts about the significance of women's vote overshadow her success. Her question 'But do I want what we have got' points to the

¹³⁴ Interestingly, Stein also made brief reference to Susan B. Anthony in *Brewsie and Willie*. A character named Janet explains that she has "been reading a book about Susan B. Anthony," going on to describe how Anthony was the one who "made women vote and have the right to money they earn and to their children, before she came along women were just like Negroes, before they were freed from slavery." See *Brewsie and Willie*, 88.

¹³⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Fully Revised and Updated 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988, 1999, 2008), 5.

¹³⁶ See J. Edgar Hoover, "Mothers . . . Our Only Hope," *Woman's Home Companion*, January 1944, pp. 20-21, 69. Cited in May, *Homeward Bound*, 73.

¹³⁷ The idea was that if American families were strong, it would be harder for communism to infiltrate the American system. See Laura A. Belmonte, "'The Red Target Is Your Home': Images of Gender and the Family" in *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 136-158.

problematic equality between women and men: Women's right to vote depends on a male right and tradition, and therefore women might become like men.¹³⁸

According to Gygas, "women practicing a patriarchal right run the risk of adapting to patriarchal authority in general, and thus would lose their potential for protest, contradiction, and dialogue."¹³⁹ Alternatively, Susan B.'s question "But do I want what we have got" might simply indicate her realization that women's suffrage was just one step forward in a much larger struggle. In either case, this question could not have been more prescient in terms of the almost stiflingly conservative and conformist culture of the immediate post-war era.¹⁴⁰

For Stein, resistance to such conformity was intensely personal. As Thomson and numerous Stein scholars have suggested, Stein almost certainly saw herself in Susan B. Anthony.¹⁴¹ Gygas writes, for example, that "it is not coincidental that at the end of her life Stein wrote a text about a figure who, like herself, fought against the patriarchal law of the word."¹⁴² Stein's presence in her libretto and her identification with Susan B. is clear from her inclusion of the character of

¹³⁸ Franziska Gygas, *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 56.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

¹⁴⁰ On this point, it is worth noting that *The Mother of Us All* includes two explicitly non-white characters, a "Negro Man" and a "Negro Woman." Neither of these characters is afforded the courtesy of a name. The "Negro Man" technically has his right to vote, granted by the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, yet in the 1940s, he is still not equal to his white countrymen and to a certain extent, white countrywomen. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the presence of the "Negro Man" alludes to the limits and unfinished nature of the suffrage movement.

¹⁴¹ Blackmer argues that Stein likely saw herself in Saint Teresa, of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, as well. She argues that "Stein, herself until recently a relatively 'forgotten' artist in a modernist landscape dominated by male 'saints' . . . clearly looked to Teresa as the model of the devoted artistic woman who achieved prominence later in late." See "The Ecstasies of Saint Teresa: The Saint as Queer Diva from Crashaw to *Four Saints in Three Acts*," 329.

¹⁴² Gygas, *Gender and Genre in Gertrude Stein*, 58. To a great extent, Thomson appeared committed to Stein's fight. Thomson believed that Stein's style of writing invited musical accompaniment. He even referred to her texts as "manna" for the composer. See Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 105, 90.

G.S. (Gertrude S. in Thomson's score). In Stein's version of the libretto, G.S. makes just one appearance, uttering two related statements in Act I, Scene 1. After all the characters assert:

Daniel was my father's name, father's name, father's name.¹⁴³

G.S. affirms:

My father's name was Daniel, Daniel and a bear, a bearded Daniel, not Daniel in the lion's den not Daniel, yes Daniel my father had a beard my father's name was Daniel.¹⁴⁴

A few moments later, when Indiana Eliot, one of Stein's fictional characters ponders "what's in a name," Susan B. responds: "Everything."¹⁴⁵ Then G.S. reiterates:

My father's name was Daniel he had a black beard he was not tall not at all tall, he had a black beard his name was Daniel.¹⁴⁶

To this, Susan B. asserts:

I had a father. Daniel was not his name.¹⁴⁷

Yet the name of Anthony's father, like Stein's, was indeed Daniel.¹⁴⁸ Thus Stein drew herself closer to Anthony, invoking the shared name of their fathers. Susan B., however, is able to separate herself from the authority of her father's name, as though offering a model for G.S.

¹⁴³ Gertrude Stein, "The Mother of Us All" in *Last Operas and Plays*, edited by Carl Van Vechten, with an introduction by Bonnie Marranca. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1949), 53.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴⁸ For an examination of Susan B. Anthony's life and work, see Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: New York University Press, 1988).

Thomson's setting of this passage is noteworthy. As Tommasini points out, "with the exception of one quotation ("London Bridge Is Falling Down"), all the tunes [in *The Mother of Us All*] are original."¹⁴⁹ The "London Bridge" quotation occurs as the chorus introduces Daniel: "Daniel was my father's name, father's name, father's name."¹⁵⁰ Coupled with Stein's text, this quotation exudes musical authority, reminding listeners of a familiar tune passed down through the generations, a sonic marker of patriarchal lineage. Sung by the full chorus, Thomson's "London Bridge" quotation is prominent, yet brief (Example P.1). It quickly garners the listener's attention and then melts away. Gertrude S. enters at the end of the quotation, transforming the tune as she recalls her father. Her ultimate renunciation of the tune foreshadows Susan B.'s later renunciation of her father's name.

¹⁴⁹ Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle*, 392. For a discussion of how Thomson incorporates quotation in his *Symphony on a Hymn Tune*, see Michael Meckna, "Sacred and Secular America: Virgil Thomson's *Symphony on a Hymn Tune*," *American Music* 8, no. 4 (1990): 465-476.

¹⁵⁰ Thomson and Stein, *The Mother of Us All*, 33.

Example P.1

“Daniel was my father’s name”

The musical score is titled "Più mosso" and "p". It features a Chorus and Gertrude S. The Chorus part includes the lyrics: "Dan - iel was my fa - ther's name, My fa - ther's name was Dan - iel. fa - ther's name, fa - ther's name." Gertrude S. has the lyrics: "My fa - ther's name was Dan - iel." The score is written for voice and piano, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked "Più mosso" and the dynamics include "p" (piano) and "mf" (mezzo-forte).

When Thomson received Stein’s libretto in March of 1946, five months before Stein’s death, the libretto contained two acts. Act I divided into three scenes, and Act II divided into eight scenes. Between the two acts, Stein had inserted an interlude which she subtitled “Susan B. A Short Story.”¹⁵¹ Thomson trimmed and revised Stein’s libretto as he composed his score. He repurposed part of the interlude to serve as a prologue to the opera, he cut two scenes, and he shifted the break between Acts 1 and 2, such that Act I included five scenes and Act II included three scenes. Perhaps most importantly, when Thomson revised the libretto, he fleshed out the character of Gertrude S., as well as the relationship between Gertrude S. and Virgil T. For example, in the prologue that he fashioned out of Stein’s interlude, Thomson turned Gertrude S.

¹⁵¹ See Stein, “The Mother of Us All,” 59-61.

and Virgil T. into the opera's narrators; *The Mother of Us All* begins with quick alternation between characters and voices:

Susan B.: Yes, I was,

Gertrude S.: said Susan

Anne: You mean you are,

Virgil T.: said Anne.¹⁵²

According to Lister, Thomson introduced Gertrude S. and Virgil T. "clearly as a convenient way to deal with the fact that, unlike a play (and unlike the rest of the libretto), the scene is in a 'she said, she said' form."¹⁵³ Theater scholar Leslie Atkins Durham points out that Gertrude S. and Virgil T., serving as the "masters of ceremonies," parallel the Commere and Compere of *Four Saints in Three Acts*.¹⁵⁴ Yet another important byproduct of this narration is that Gertrude S. is immediately associated with the voice of Susan B., and Virgil T. is immediately associated with the voice of Susan B.'s companion Anne (Example P.2). In other words, Stein and Thomson's artistic/political collaboration mirrors Susan B. and Anne's partnership and political collaboration.¹⁵⁵ Given that this scene takes place between two women in Susan B.'s sitting room, we might be tempted to read Thomson's reinstating of his presence as an unwelcome intrusion of

¹⁵² Thomson and Stein, *The Mother of Us All*, 19. See also Stein, "The Mother of Us All," 59.

¹⁵³ Lister, "Another Completely Interesting Opera," 6.

¹⁵⁴ Leslie Atkins Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein: Absence, Culture, and the Landscape of American Alternative Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 98.

¹⁵⁵ This too may have a precedent in the pair's first opera. Blackmer asserts that *Four Saints in Three Acts* represents something of a 'perfect marriage' between queer collaborators. She argues that "Stein and Thomson create a dynamic symmetrical balance between elements usually characterized by intimate antagonism . . . or arranged according to patterns of dominance and subordination (as in music *over* words, masculine *over* feminine, or gay man *over* lesbian)." See "The Ecstasies of Saint Teresa: The Saint as Queer Diva from Crashaw to *Four Saints in Three Acts*," 331.

an otherwise all-female domain. Yet Thomson had spent countless hours as a welcome guest in Stein’s real sitting room in Paris. As he sits in Susan B’s fictional sitting room, enjoying the company of Stein, Susan B., and Anne, one might recall his association with Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas.¹⁵⁶

Example P.2

Beginning of the Prologue

The musical score is for the beginning of the prologue. It features four vocal parts: Susan B. Anthony, Anne, Gertrude S., and Virgil T. The tempo is marked as (♩ = 80c). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score begins with a piano introduction in the right hand, marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The vocal parts enter with the following lyrics: Susan B. Anthony: "Yes I was,"; Anne: "You mean you are,"; Gertrude S.: "said Su-san."; Virgil T.: "said Anne." The piano accompaniment includes a drum part with a snare drum and a bass drum, marked with sfz (sforzando) dynamics. The piano part also includes a grand staff with treble and bass clefs, marked with sfz and f dynamics.

Thomson’s prologue thus inserts Stein even more fully into her text, positioning Stein as the vessel through which we hear Susan B.’s voice. Thomson’s decisions in terms of text setting and emphasis also herald Susan B. as the voice of authority. As Susan B. finishes the prologue, she asserts that “Yes, yes they [men] always listen to me.” In Thomson’s score, the last three words are set off from the preceding text and arpeggiated in a grand fashion such that they become an injunction: “Listen to me” (Example P.3).

¹⁵⁶ In fact, I wonder if Anne is meant to represent Alice.

Example P.3

“Yes, yes they always listen to me”

The musical score is for Susan B. Anthony's song "Yes, yes they always listen to me". It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major and 4/4 time. The lyrics are "Yes, yes they al - ways lis - ten to me." The piano accompaniment is in G major and 4/4 time. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mp*, *ff*, *p*, *cresc.*, *ff*, *rall.*, *al fine*, and *molto rall.*. There are also triplets and slurs in both parts.

The authority that Thomson’s setting grants Susan B. seems to extend to Stein, Susan B.’s representative in the twentieth century. Yet Thomson deleted two of Stein’s scenes, as though undermining Stein’s textual authority. Interestingly, these scenes feature not insignificant appearances from Virgil T. In fact, in Stein’s version of the libretto, Virgil T. does not quite appear to be the unconditional supporter of women’s suffrage and of Stein that he became in the opera. In Stein’s Act II, Scene 2, for example, Virgil T. “makes” a group of men “gather around him.”¹⁵⁷ He then declares:

Hear me he says hear me in every way I have satisfaction, I sit I stand I walk around and I am grand, and you all know it.¹⁵⁸

This moment, which positions Virgil T. not as an ally of Susan B. (and Gertrude S.) but instead as a member of the patriarchy, would have subverted the message that Thomson’s revisions to the prologue seemed to send. According to Lister, “Thomson’s justification” for deleting this scene was that “a political meeting would have been redundant, since there was already a political

¹⁵⁷ Stein, “*The Mother of Us All*,” 66.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

meeting in act I.”¹⁵⁹ Lister also noted the possibility that Thomson had omitted the scene “because it makes reference to Virgil T.’s homosexuality (something Thomson was highly reluctant to acknowledge publicly for almost all of his life).”¹⁶⁰ Thomson’s decision to omit this scene, whatever his reasons, had real political consequences, for it assured that the composer’s relationship to Susan B., Stein, and women’s rights would remain unquestioned. Similarly, Thomson cut Stein’s Act II, Scene 4, another scene in which Virgil T., despite his very brief appearance, emerges as a follower of Daniel Webster, rather than of Susan B. Here, Lister explained that Thomson had told him that “it would have been impossible to put one of Daniel Webster’s lines in scene 4, ‘Coming and coming alone, no man is alone when he comes’ on the New York stage” in 1947.¹⁶¹

By omitting Stein’s Act II, Scene 2, Thomson also avoided having to set a racial epithet to music, a consequence that has gone unmentioned in previous discussions of either version of the libretto text. Stein’s Scene 2 opens with Susan B. and Anne discussing who is and who is not important. Eventually, Susan B. asserts:

I must choose I do choose, men and women women and men I do choose. I must choose colored or white white or colored I must choose, I must choose, weak or strong, strong or weak I must choose.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Lister, “Another Completely Interesting Opera,” 7.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 7. Lister was referring to this line, spoken by John Adams: “I ask you Virgil T. do you love women, I do. I love women but I am never subdued by them never.” See Stein, “*The Mother of Us All*,” 66.

¹⁶¹ Lister, “Another Completely Interesting Opera,” 7. See Stein, “*The Mother of Us All*,” 70.

¹⁶² Stein, “*The Mother of Us All*,” 65.

A moment later, a character named Jo the Loiterer announces: “Fight fight fight, between the nigger and the white.”¹⁶³ Chris the Citizen adds: “And the women.”¹⁶⁴ The men begin to bicker, and Chris the Citizen eggs them on: “Fight fight between the nigger and the white and the women.”¹⁶⁵ Stein’s decision to invoke this epithet is jarring, and Thomson may not have wanted to deal with it musically or politically. Yet Stein’s language begins to allude to the competing agendas within the suffrage movement. The passage of the Fifteenth Amendment incensed Anthony and some other white suffragettes, revealing a deep-seated racism that would continue to plague the feminist movement into the 1950s and 1960s, and even the present day.¹⁶⁶ Stein’s language also clarifies Susan B.’s disappointment in the subsequent scene (which Thomson kept) when one of the characters, the “Negro Man,” appears unconcerned by the fact that women remain disenfranchised. Stein’s libretto thus points to the complex intertwining of racism and sexism in the United States.

What are we to make of Thomson’s revisions and cuts? Perhaps he was cutting out the parts of the libretto that he felt did not reflect positively on himself. In the case of Act II, Scene 2, he may simply have wanted to avoid a racial epithet. Or perhaps Thomson truly wanted to become

¹⁶³ Ibid., 65.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 65.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 67.

¹⁶⁶ As bell hooks explains: “Prior to white male support of suffrage for black men, white women activists had believed it would further their cause to ally themselves with black political activists, but when it seemed black men might get the vote while they remained disenfranchised, political solidarity with black people was forgotten and they urged white men to allow racial solidarity to overshadow their plans to support black male suffrage.” hooks notes that as a result, “black women were placed in a double bind; to support women’s suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice.” Thus racism has marked the women’s movement ever since its inception. See *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 3.

Stein's ally and champion after her death, rewriting the libretto to rewrite their partnership. As Tommasini notes, Thomson was deeply pained by Stein's untimely death:

In later life, he spoke of Gertrude's death with perceptible defensiveness, as if he should have recognized the severity of her condition and been more attentive. After their acrimonious breakup and tortured reconciliation, Virgil avoided delving into Gertrude's personal affairs, thinking it safer. But clearly, he felt guilty for having missed the signs of her illness.¹⁶⁷

Tommasini's reference to Thomson and Stein's "acrimonious breakup" is significant. The two had a falling out in 1931, when Thomson inserted himself into a quarrel between Stein and the poet Georges Hugnet. Importantly, the debate concerned the notion of authorship.

According to Maurice Grosser:

Georges had recently completed a long series of poems about his childhood entitled "*Enfances*" which Gertrude—who at this time was seeing a great deal of him—found so admirable that she undertook to translate it into English. The two texts, Gertrude's translation and Georges's original, made up a remarkable pair, inasmuch as the obscurities of one acted to clarify the obscurities of the other. They decided to publish the two works under the title "*Enfances, Poems by Georges Hugnet, Followed by an English Translation by Gertrude Stein*" . . . The title, however, did not long satisfy Gertrude. Her part of the work, she began to consider, was much too good to be dismissed as a mere translation. In fact, it was an important independent work, and the title had to be revised to read: "*Enfances, Poèmes de Georges Hugnet et Gertrude Stein.*" Even more, since Gertrude was a woman, it was only natural that her name should be given precedence and be cited first. Georges refused to accept the change and they fought bitterly over it.¹⁶⁸

Grosser explained how Thomson, "who did not at all approve of the behavior of either party, proposed a compromise . . . something about adding after each name the date of the work's composition."¹⁶⁹ Stein initially accepted but then rejected the idea. Moreover, she sent Thomson a

¹⁶⁷ Tommasini, *Composer on the Aisle*, 390.

¹⁶⁸ Maurice Grosser, "Visiting Gertrude and Alice," *New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1986. For another account of the Stein-Hugnet quarrel, see Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises: 1923-1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 301-320.

¹⁶⁹ Grosser, "Visiting Gertrude and Alice."

note a few days later expressing her desire to cut off all contact with him. As Grosser recalled, Thomson and Stein “did not see each other or speak again until the fall of 1934 when *Four Saints* was revived in Chicago and Alice [Toklas] and Gertrude came there to see it.”¹⁷⁰ Alice Toklas was Stein’s partner, and Grosser, who was Thomson’s partner, blamed Toklas for the breakup, writing:

The whole affair, aimless, silly, and wounding, I can explain only as another example of Alice’s jealousy working on Gertrude’s literary vanity, here acting to persuade her that Virgil had gone over to the enemy’s camp.¹⁷¹

The quarrel, regardless of whose fault it was, left its mark on Thomson. It appears to have left its mark on Stein as well, perhaps explaining the less-than-flattering depictions of Thomson in her libretto. Thus Thomson may have rewritten himself as Stein’s ally and champion to assuage some of the guilt and regret he felt for not having stood up for Stein and her work in the past. On the one hand, Thomson’s revisions usurp Stein’s authorial authority. Yet on the other hand, they buttress that authority, offering a model for men to support a feminist authorial voice and agenda. To be sure, Thomson explained in his autobiography how he “could not deny [Stein] the feminist approach” in *The Mother of Us All*. Perhaps he ultimately bought into that approach enough to put himself in service of it, as though fashioning himself as feminist too.

Attending to Thomson’s voice and perspective on *The Mother of Us All*, generally regarded by literary scholars as Stein’s feminist manifesto, reminds us of the inherently collaborative nature of the operatic enterprise. Yet there are other voices and perspectives to consider beyond those of the librettist and composer. Thus in the following chapters, I reinsert the performer’s voices and claims to authorship, showing that by listening particularly to American sopranos, we can better

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

understand mid-century American opera within the context of American feminism and the American Cold War. In the sequel that follows these three case studies, I suggest that we also strain our ears to listen to the voices (the authors) of feminist dissent in the audience, thereby embracing opera as a truly polyvocal act and creation.

CHAPTER 1

Magda Sorel Visits *The Consul*: Staging the Endangered Family “Somewhere in Europe”

When Gian-Carlo Menotti’s musical drama *The Consul* opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theater on 15 March 1950, Americans took more than a passing interest. Playing six nights a week, *The Consul* lasted eight months on Broadway.¹⁷² For what many viewers understood to be an opera blatantly masquerading as a musical, this was no small feat. *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes proudly invoked the “o” word when he congratulated Menotti, stating that his “opera” had “eloquence, momentousness, and intensity of expression unequaled by any native composer.”¹⁷³ Drama critic Robert Garland insisted: “Don’t let the ‘musical drama’ printed in the program fool you. What Mr. Menotti, the composer-librettist, has written is a grand opera.”¹⁷⁴ Garland encouraged viewers, moreover, to embrace the luxury, enthusing: “‘The Consul’ is grand opera, so make the most of it. I did, and had myself a grand opera time.”¹⁷⁵ As these comments suggest, Menotti had managed to mold the genre of American opera into something more than an artistic and financial liability. In Menotti’s hands, American opera was up-to-date, exciting, emotionally moving, politically and socially relevant, and even profitable.

¹⁷² *The Consul*, March 15, 1950–November 4, 1950, Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, NY, Internet Broadway Database (accessed 1 May 2017). *The Consul*’s opening run totaled 269 performances. *Porgy and Bess*, often considered the prime example of “American opera,” played for only 124 performances during its original Broadway run. See *Porgy and Bess*, October 10, 1935–January 25, 1936, Alvin Theatre, New York, NY, Internet Broadway Database (accessed 1 May 2017). *Porgy and Bess* has been revived repeatedly both on and off Broadway since the 1930s; admittedly, *The Consul* has not been revived to this extent.

¹⁷³ Olin Downes, “Menotti ‘Consul’ Has Its Premiere: Composer Also Directed Stage Presentation of Opera—Tragic Story of Europe,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1950.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Garland, “Patricia Neway Great in Fine Musical Drama,” *Journal American*, 16 March 1950.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

On 1 May 1950, as the opera entered the third month of its Broadway run, Menotti was featured on the cover of *Time*, one of the ultimate measures of popular success.¹⁷⁶ The magazine praised *The Consul* for its “realism and immediacy,” explaining how the opera told “the story of a desperate woman in a police state who commits suicide when her last attempt to get a visa fails.”¹⁷⁷ Undeterred by Menotti’s Italian heritage and citizenship, *Time* also sought to claim the composer for the United States:

Menotti, still an Italian citizen, often stammers in his native language, but after 2 years in the U.S., his English is unfaltering and fluent. When he sits down to work his ideas into words & music, he finds that suggestions for both generally occur to him simultaneously. The result, as in his heroine’s second-act aria in *The Consul*, is not only moving music but clean, singable English.¹⁷⁸

Thus *Time* seemed to suggest that by writing his operas, Menotti was becoming more American. Yet Menotti’s European heritage, and his Italian heritage in particular, remained important, for here was a composer with a cultural lineage reaching back to the likes of Puccini and Verdi, making his life and work in the United States, thereby leading the way towards a more firmly established national operatic tradition. *The Consul* forms the cornerstone of Menotti’s output in this respect, for viewers inside and outside the United States quickly came to regard the opera as an American work, in line with an American political agenda.

Importantly, Menotti did not accomplish this work alone. As was his custom, he wrote both the music and the libretto, yet I contend that it was Patricia Neway (1919-2012), the soprano who championed *The Consul* into the 1960s and who brought its tragic heroine to life and death

¹⁷⁶ “Composer on Broadway,” *Time*, 1 May 1950, p. 64. The magazine reported that *The Consul* had “opened on Broadway with a \$100,000 advance sale.”

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

who ensured the opera's impact and success. Neway's vivid portrayal of Magda Sorel captivated audiences, in turn launching and largely defining Neway's career. In the eyes of her viewers, it was as though Neway truly became the desperate European mother whom she played. This was a crucial aspect of *The Consul's* appeal, for as I argue, Magda may be understood as a foil for the American wife and mother, an embodiment of what was supposedly at stake during the Cold War. Neway's experience in the role of Magda, moreover, demonstrates a powerful way in which global Cold War politics and domestic gender politics overlapped with operatic convention, mapping simultaneously onto the soprano/operatic heroine. Neway eventually came to believe that the lines between herself and her character blurred to such an extent that Magda impinged on her own identity as an American singer. Thus it was in Menotti's hands and through Neway's body and voice that a distinctly Cold War take on the tragic operatic heroine emerged, temporarily boosting the appeal of the genre of American opera.

In this chapter, I read Menotti's music and text through and against a number of historical sources, including newspaper articles and reviews, archived interviews, memoirs, biographies, historical accounts of the early 1950s, as well as a film version of *The Consul*, televised in 1960 and re-released on DVD in 2004. Because Menotti's personal papers are not yet publically available, I rely instead on an array of archival collections.¹⁷⁹ Most illuminating for me were the Gian-Carlo Menotti Papers at the Curtis Institute of Music, where John Gruen deposited many of the interviews he conducted while working on his biography of the composer. I also spent considerable time with the Lehman Engel Papers at Yale University; Engel conducted *The Consul* on Broadway in 1950, and his papers include his conductor's score, autographed by Menotti. To a lesser extent,

¹⁷⁹ According to musicologist Barbara Heyman, Menotti's personal papers are in the possession of his adopted son and heir, Francis Menotti, who currently resides in Edinburgh, Scotland.

I turned to a variety of collections at the New York Public Library, including the Heddy Baum Papers, Jean Dalrymple Papers, Otto Luening Papers, Rhoda Levine Papers, as well as clipping files on Menotti and Patricia Neway.

It is worth noting that Menotti (1911-2007) proves a rather difficult composer to study. Although he was wildly successful during the 1940s and 1950s, he was out of fashion by the 1970s; his name has since been subject to scorn and his music and career, afforded very little serious scholarly attention.¹⁸⁰ Musicologist Jennifer Barnes's work represents an important exception. She discusses Menotti's television opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) quite productively in her book *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television*.¹⁸¹ Yet most of the attention that Menotti has received has tended to come from devoted fans, mostly notably from the music critics John Gruen and John Ardoin.¹⁸² While I refer to Gruen's *Menotti: A Biography* and Ardoin's *The Stages of Menotti*, I do so carefully, acknowledging that both of these sources are somewhat clouded by their authors' admiration for their subject.¹⁸³ One of my aims in this chapter is to demonstrate why Menotti is worthy of more critical study. Through my analysis of *The Consul*, I show how the

¹⁸⁰ Much of the scholarship that currently exists on Menotti is best described as surveys of the composer's output and career. See Donald L. Hixon, *Gian Carlo Menotti: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000); Ken Wlaschin, *Gian Carlo Menotti on Screen: Opera, Dance and Choral Works on Film, Television and Video* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999); Lyndal Grieb, *The Operas of Gian Carlo Menotti, 1937-1972: A Selective Bibliography* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974); Robert Tricoire, *Gian Carlo Menotti: L'homme et Son Oeuvre* (Paris: Seghers, 1966).

¹⁸¹ See Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003), 15-41.

¹⁸² John Gruen (1926-2016) was known as a writer, photographer, and critic on the arts, particularly dance. He was based in New York City and contributed regularly to the *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Vogue*, and *New York Magazine* during the 1970s and 1980s. John Ardoin (1935-2001) worked as a music critic and was best known for his thirty-two-year association with the *Dallas Morning News*.

¹⁸³ See John Gruen, *Menotti: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1978); John Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985).

composer helped to invigorate the genre of American opera, popularizing the supposedly high-brow European import by making calculated overtures to opera aficionados and neophytes alike and suggesting that opera could in fact be used to further the American way of life during the early Cold War.

The Consul's Beginnings

According to producer Chandler Cowles, Menotti began writing the music and the libretto for *The Consul* in 1947, at which time the composer's *The Medium* and *The Telephone* were running on Broadway.¹⁸⁴ Cowles and his friend Ephram Zimbalist Jr. were working as co-producers of the double bill. In 1973, Cowles recalled to John Gruen:

'The Medium' ran for a long time. We got all our money back. During the run of 'The Medium,' I said, 'How about another one?' And [Menotti] said 'Well, I have an idea for a new opera. It's called 'The Consul.' I thought he said 'The Council.' But it turned out that he was broke. So I said, 'Why don't I commission it?' He said all right.¹⁸⁵

Cowles noted that although he commissioned the opera in 1947, Menotti did not complete it until 1950:

It took a long time. Gian Carlo struggled hard with that opera. The premise was a good one, the characters were real.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Chandler Cowles (1917-1997) was an actor and producer, active on Broadway and in Hollywood. He was very supportive of Menotti's work during the 1940s and 1950s.

¹⁸⁵ Chandler Cowles, interview with John Gruen, New York City, 8 September 1973, p. 5, Folder 32, Box 1, Gian-Carlo Menotti Papers (GCMP), MSS 23, Curtis Institute of Music Archives. Cowles recalled that Menotti's fee was \$200.00. In addition to commissioning *The Consul*, Cowles went on to produce the opera, partnering again with Zimbalist.

¹⁸⁶ Cowles, interview with Gruen, p. 7. Interestingly, Menotti told Gruen: "Of all my works, *The Consul* was written the quickest. I was very much inspired. The aria 'Papers, Papers' was written in one night." Menotti, quoted in Gruen, *Menotti*, 98. Moreover, it should be noted that despite Cowles's recollection of Menotti's compositional process, three years is hardly a particularly long gestation period for an opera.

To some extent, the characters were indeed “real” because Menotti apparently found his inspiration from a notice that appeared in the *New York Times* on 12 February 1947.¹⁸⁷ According to the *Times*, a 38-year-old Polish woman named Mrs. Sofia Feldy had come to the United States to reunite with her husband who had successfully immigrated to Chicago some years prior. Mr. Feldy, however, claimed that he had divorced his wife back in November of 1940. He agreed only to accept his daughter, who had accompanied her mother to the United States. Mrs. Feldy was thus “refused admission” to the country; she “committed suicide by hanging in the Ellis Island detention room.”¹⁸⁸ Menotti crafted his music and libretto around the story of Sofia Feldy’s abandonment, both personal and political.¹⁸⁹ Importantly, he flipped the Ellis Island location to a police state “somewhere in Europe,” and he called his main character Magda Sorel.¹⁹⁰

Menotti shaped Magda to conform to the mold of the characteristically tragic operatic heroine prominent since the nineteenth century. Yet it is significant that Magda is a politically tragic figure; she is not slighted in love, ill, or merely poor, and in this way, she diverges from the

¹⁸⁷ See “Immigrant A Suicide: Woman, Denied Entry to U.S., Hangs Herself on Ellis Island,” *New York Times*, 12 February 1947. See also Gruen, *Menotti*, 78.

¹⁸⁸ “Immigrant A Suicide.”

¹⁸⁹ In fact, Menotti had been interested in the plight of displaced European immigrants for some time. As Gruen reports, Menotti spent some of 1947 living in Hollywood, where he attempted several film scripts. *The Bridge*, for example, was based in part on a newspaper story about a group of Austrian refugees who lived on a bridge between Austria and Hungary for an entire week, because neither country was willing to assume responsibility for them as citizens. Gruen writes that Arthur Freed (of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) found *The Bridge* “too depressing” and unlikely to “appeal to the majority of moviegoers, who were tired of sad war pictures.” (See *Menotti*, 77). Menotti subsequently abandoned *The Bridge* and began a new script entitled *A Happy Ending*. Unfortunately, this too was deemed unsuitable for Hollywood. Gruen maintains that Menotti’s Hollywood experience and *The Bridge* in particular “proved invaluable,” leading the composer to his next major work, *The Consul*. (See *Menotti*, 78). For the newspaper article that may have inspired *The Bridge*, see “Refugees Dodge Trains on Border Bridge As Both Austria and Hungary Bar Entry,” *New York Times*, 20 May 1947.

¹⁹⁰ See Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Consul: Musical Drama in Three Acts, Vocal Score, Revised Edition* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1950, 1991). Menotti’s preface includes the following indication before the list of acts and scenes: “Time—the present. The action takes place somewhere in Europe.”

standard nineteenth-century model. Magda's husband John is a political dissident; hounded by secret police, he is forced to abandon his family and go into hiding during the opening scene of the opera. Before he leaves, John instructs Magda to seek help from the foreign, presumably American, consulate. Magda obeys, visiting the consulate day after day, trying to secure visas for her family. Unfortunately, she encounters a wall of impenetrable bureaucracy, personified by the consul's secretary, a callous woman who refuses to do anything but push an endless pile of paperwork. Over the course of the opera, Magda becomes increasingly panicked as she realizes that her family's future is doomed. She watches as her baby dies of malnutrition and her mother-in-law of sorrow. Finally, Magda resorts to the most extreme of measures, gassing herself to death in her family's apartment because she believes that John will only remain in hiding if he knows that she too is dead. In a final tragic twist, John comes back anyway and is arrested. At the opera's conclusion, his fate remains unknown.

Patricia Neway's Magda

The role of Magda became soprano Patricia Neway's claim to fame, and vice-versa. At the time of *The Consul's* premiere, Neway was thirty years old and largely unknown.¹⁹¹ In 1946, she had appeared in a production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at the Chautauqua Opera, and in 1948, she had shared the role of the Female Chorus with Brenda Lewis (the singer who would go on to create the role of Lizzie Borden in Jack Beeson's 1965 opera) in Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of*

¹⁹¹ Patricia Neway (1919-2012) was born in Brooklyn, New York. She earned a BA from Notre Dame College for Girls in 1939. According to Peter G. Davis and Christopher E. Mehrens, she subsequently "became seriously interested in music and developed her voice with Morris Gesell, whom she later married." See Peter G. Davis and Christopher E. Mehrens, "Neway, Patricia," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2267352> (accessed 1 May 2017).

Lucretia at the Ziegfeld Theatre on Broadway.¹⁹² Magda ultimately proved not only to be Neway's big break, but also the role that permanently defined her career. In 1962, Ardoin reported on the NYCO's new production of *The Consul*, confessing:

It is impossible to think of anyone but Patricia Neway as Magda and her portrayal is surely one of the most memorable characterizations of the contemporary lyric stage.¹⁹³

When Neway died in 2012, *Opera News* recalled the effect of her Magda:

On opening night—and at most succeeding performances—Neway stopped the show cold with Magda's principal aria, "To This We've Come." She won the 1949-50 Donaldson Award for best actress in a musical for her devastating performance, which remains definitive.¹⁹⁴

Similarly, *New York Times* writer Margalit Fox wrote:

It was as Magda in "The Consul" that she made her reputation . . . As was widely reported, Ms. Neway's long aria, "To This We've Come," sung in Act 2 as Magda rages against the consul's secretary, brought down the house nearly every night.¹⁹⁵

Without Magda, Neway would likely not have had the career that she had, because that career, for better or for worse, revolved around Magda. On the other hand, without Neway's six-nights-a-week devotion to the role, *The Consul* simply could not have made its impact. Indeed, audiences did not flock to the Ethel Barrymore Theater just to see *The Consul*; they came to see and hear Neway/Magda.

¹⁹² "The Rape of Lucretia," Ziegfeld Theatre, 12/29/1948-1/15/1949, IBDB, <http://www.ibdb.com/Production/View/2053> (accessed 7 May 2017). For a discussion and analysis of *The Rape of Lucretia*, see J.P.E. Harper-Scott, "Britten's Opera About Rape," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21 (2010): 65-88.

¹⁹³ John Ardoin, "The Consul," *Musical America* 82 (May 1962): 25.

¹⁹⁴ "Patricia Neway, 92, the First Magda Sorel in *The Consul*, has Died," *Opera News*, 29 January 2012.

¹⁹⁵ Margalit Fox, "Patricia Neway, Operatic Soprano Who Won a Tony, Dies at 92," *New York Times*, 1 February 2012.

In 1974, Neway told Gruen that she had come to sing in *The Consul* by way of “the usual channels.”¹⁹⁶ Neway explained that her agent had suggested that she “come down to New York, and sing for Menotti.”¹⁹⁷ As she recalled:

I sang for him - three times. I sang some Verdi, and other things. After the first audition, he called me down to the foots and he said, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to use you for, but I’m going to use you for something.’¹⁹⁸

After her third audition, Neway learned that she would “sing all the MAGDAS for the backer’s auditions, until all the money was raised,” and after about two months of backer’s auditions, Menotti told her that she would continue singing the role on Broadway.¹⁹⁹

Neway estimated to Gruen that she had sung the role of Magda “about 550 times” throughout her career.²⁰⁰ She recalled singing in her final two performances in a New York City Opera (NYCO) production in 1966, noting that she and Menotti had a temporary falling out over the production:

The older one gets, and the more one has experience, the more one has a technique that is uniquely one’s own . . . There were things that I needed desperately to get emotionally out of the role that I had become use to. Gian Carlo had been used to training people anew. So we were really at odds for the first time in all those years.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ Patricia Neway, interview with John Gruen, New York City, 8 April 1974, p. 1, Folder 9, Box 1, GCMP.

¹⁹⁷ Neway, *ibid.*, 1. Neway recalled that her agent also “handled the girl who sang Monica” in *The Medium*. She was likely referring to Evelyn Keller.

¹⁹⁸ Neway, *ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹⁹ Neway, *ibid.*, 1-2. Neway remembered that “Mrs. Zimbalist . . . was the main source of income, and we had to raise, I think, \$75,000.00 more.” She continued, explaining that “the backer’s auditions were really quite petrifying for me. I mean, you had Toscanini sitting under your nose. It was always a most select audience.”

²⁰⁰ Neway, *ibid.*, 6.

²⁰¹ Neway, *ibid.*, 6.

Neway remembered the first performance of the new production, which Menotti directed, as a complete disaster. A few months later, she sang in the second and final performance, this time directed by Frank Rizzo. As she put it, “the performance was fine, and the papers were fine, and Gian Carlo stayed in the back like a good boy.”²⁰²

A familiar tension emerges here between composer and performer, one that is all the more pronounced because of Neway and Menotti’s interaction with one another. According to Neway, Menotti was reluctant to relinquish control of the work. In fact, Menotti complained about Neway to Gruen, charging that the soprano “became terribly didactic . . . teacherish and very set in her ways.”²⁰³ Dismissing the “interpretive arts,” he balked at Neway taking ownership of the role of Magda.²⁰⁴ Yet herein lay one of the keys to *The Consul’s* success. In 2004, Neway claimed that what mattered most to her were not the “awards and accolades” she received for her portrayal of Magda but rather, “those people from the audience who came backstage with tear-stained faces to thank me for telling their story.”²⁰⁵ Menotti’s own biographer may have been one of those “tear-stained faces.” In his 2008 memoir, Gruen recalled how he was “very moved” by *The Consul*, “with its story echoing my own experiences in war-torn Europe, when my parents had to flee Germany and Italy.”²⁰⁶ He continued, explaining how “their efforts were met with the same sort of bureaucratic

²⁰² Neway, *ibid.*, 7.

²⁰³ Menotti, quoted in Gruen, *Menotti*, 227.

²⁰⁴ Menotti told Gruen: “I’ve never been very fascinated by interpretive artists . . . I’m much more fascinated by writers, or painters, or poets. It’s the creative process that fascinates me.” Menotti, quoted in *ibid.*, 227.

²⁰⁵ Neway, quoted in Fox, “Patricia Neway, Operatic Soprano Who Won a Tony, Dies at 92.”

²⁰⁶ John Gruen, *Callas Kissed Me...Lenny Too! A Critic’s Memoir* (Brooklyn, NY: PowerHouse Books, 2008), 223.

red tape” that Magda encountered.²⁰⁷ As Neway’s words suggest, she committed to the role of Magda, because she believed in it as more than a role or character. She believed Magda’s experience was real, and it was that belief and dedication that allowed Neway to embody the desperate European wife and mother so completely.

Neway even noted how the lines between herself and her “character” began to blur over the years. In 1974, she told Gruen how she “felt that the image of Magda had become almost too important in a career that had plenty in it,” explaining that “somehow that image and that identification was so confused, as to whether Magda was myself or the character.”²⁰⁸ Neway’s words demonstrate how at the same time that she had defined the role of Magda, the role had defined her, ultimately impinging on her own identity. As she admitted, even though she liked Olivia Stapp’s portrayal of Magda in the NYCO’s 1974 revival:

I have to [sic] many preconceived ideas to be overwhelmed by anybody. That is the truth. [The role of Magda] is too much a part of me.²⁰⁹

To be sure, during the 1950s, some American commentators appeared almost wary of the extent to which Neway had committed to the role of Magda. Writers such as Maurice Zolotow and Sidney Fields worked hard to distinguish Neway, the happy and successful American soprano, from Magda, the abandoned European housewife.²¹⁰ In another instance, W.G. Rogers

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 223.

²⁰⁸ Neway, interview with Gruen, 7. Interestingly, Neway played two more European mothers after *The Consul*; in 1958, she was “the mother” in Menotti’s *Maria Golovin*, and in 1959, she appeared as the Mother Abbess in *The Sound of Music*.

²⁰⁹ Neway, *ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁰ See Maurice Zolotow, “Patricia Neway Talks of Magda Sorel,” and Sidney Fields, “Only Human,” in Patricia Neway Clippings, New York Public Library, Performing Arts Division, Theatre Clippings.

commented incredulously on that fact that Neway could “come out smiling” after “the curtain falls on one of the grisliest scenes on the stage.”²¹¹ In vivid prose, he explained:

The climactic suicide scene, with a draped black shawl and a tumbling body, makes audiences’ skin creep. Yet Miss Neway finishes the evening with a smile.²¹²

Neway told Rogers that she had to distance herself from her character:

When I myself feel it, I also feel that it is not being successful. What I am doing is an art form, and I believe it should be exhilarating. You have to be happy when the part you play is sad.²¹³

Thus Neway reminded Rogers and her audience that she was acting or playing a part, not actually experiencing Magda’s trauma. It is telling, however, that Neway later struggled with this very distinction. As I demonstrate, *The Consul*, and the role of Magda in particular, served to show how Americans stood apart from their European neighbors. Identifying too much with Magda’s plight was problematic for Neway’s career and perhaps also for the singer’s psyche.²¹⁴

Interpreting *The Consul*

Two playbills from 1950 reveal how Menotti and *The Consul* were advertised to American audiences that year. In the playbill circulated during the previews at the Shubert Theatre in

²¹¹ See W.G. Rogers, “Happiness Under a Sad Black Shawl,” in Patricia Neway Clippings.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Neway, quoted in *ibid.*

²¹⁴ As Neway recalled to Gruen in 1974, her career really did have “plenty in it” besides the role of Magda. After *The Consul*, Neway joined the NYCO, appearing as a principal singer in the company from 1951 to 1966. She starred in a number of the NYCO’s American productions including David Tamkin’s *The Dybbuk* (1951), Mark Bucci’s *Tale for a Deaf Ear* (1958), and Hugo Weisgall’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1959). In 1960, she won a Tony for her role as the Mother Abbess in the original Broadway production of *The Sound of Music*, an achievement highlighted in Fox’s obituary for the *New York Times*. Fox pointed out that Neway was “one of the relatively few singers of her era to move seamlessly back and forth between the opera house and the Broadway stage.” This unique ability was almost certainly a byproduct of her stunning initial popularity as the operatic soprano in the opera on Broadway. See Fox, “Patricia Neway, Operatic Soprano Who Won a Tony, Dies at 92.”

Philadelphia, Menotti appealed to his viewers' emotions. He described his musical drama as "a story of desperate people defeated by human machinery of a consular office. Instead of aid and sympathy, they receive forms to fill out. Instead of relief from their fears, they are given only the tortures of endless waiting."²¹⁵ In the playbill for the Broadway production, Menotti's biography was set up to appeal to viewers' patriotism. The following excerpt is particularly telling:

It was in 1928 that Gian-Carlo's mother decided that he should go to America to become a disciplined rather than a pampered musician. She brought him to this country and enrolled him at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, where he feels his genuine musical education began. Five years later, Menotti had finished his first opera, "Amelia Goes to the Ball," which was a witty satire on the kind of life he himself had been living as a youth in Italy.²¹⁶

By celebrating Menotti's "disciplined" American education at the expense of his "pampered" Italian upbringing, the Broadway playbill effectively hailed Menotti as an American composer. The playbill went on to spend some time describing *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, recalling "its fresh, original melodic line, its gaiety and its playfulness." This focus—on Menotti's childhood and earliest opera—likely helped to give audiences the impression that with *The Consul*, they would be observing for the first time, the serious, mature, and "American" Menotti.

By and large, reviewers fell in line with *The Consul's* advertising, emphasizing the opera's contemporary relevance and status as an American achievement. In a rave review, *New York Times* music critic Olin Downes highlighted *The Consul's* immediacy:

This opera is written from the heart, with a blazing sincerity and a passion of human understanding. It is as contemporary as the cold war, surrealism, television, the atom

²¹⁵ Playbill, Chandler Cowles and Efreim Zimbalist, Jr. present Gian-Carlo Menotti's New Musical Drama *The Consul*, Schubert Theater, Philadelphia, Wed. Eve., March 1 thru Sat. Eve., March 11, in Folder 284, Box 6, Printed Ephemera Relating to Music and Opera, 1696-2007 (MS Thr 1003), Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

²¹⁶ *The Consul*, the Playbill for the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, p. 40, in Scrapbook 12, Box 57, Lehman Engel Papers (LEP), MSS 39, Special Collections, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University.

bomb. It is torn out of the life of the present-day world and poses an issue which mercilessly confronts humanity today.²¹⁷

Similarly, William Hawkins of the *New York World-Telegram* declared:

Here is lyric drama of freshness and freedom, carved to the bone in every element, so it repeatedly jolts you till your teeth jar.

More importantly, here is theater talking intimately about the world of today and tomorrow. This is the story of the Twentieth Century's oppressed, told vividly enough to strike home in a Park Avenue penthouse.²¹⁸

Significantly, both Downes and Hawkins blurred the lines between fiction (opera) and reality in their discussions of *The Consul*. Another reviewer simply quipped, "Broadway should be proud of Gian-Carlo Menotti—and Gian-Carlo Menotti should be proud of Broadway, U.S.A."²¹⁹

In 1978, Gruen noted that historically, *The Consul's* "unnamed demagogic country" had been "interpreted as Communist or Fascist," and its foreign consulate, "also left unnamed . . . more often than not identified as home-grown."²²⁰ Early reviewers certainly helped to cement this interpretation. As Howard Taubman wrote in the *New York Times*:

The country [the Sorels] wish to leave is never designated; you are at liberty to make your own guess. The country to which they wish to go is not designated either, but to any one who knows Europe today and the yearning of many of its people to come to the United States, only one guess seems necessary.²²¹

²¹⁷ Downes, "Menotti 'Consul' Has Its Premiere."

²¹⁸ William Hawkins, "The Consul' a Hit; Electrifies Audience," *New York World-Telegram*, 16 March 1950.

²¹⁹ John Chapman, "An Opera for Broadway: Menotti's Musical Thriller, 'The Consul,' Is a Notable Theatrical Work," in Scrapbook 12, Box 57, LEP.

²²⁰ Gruen, *Menotti*, 87.

²²¹ Howard Taubman, "Labeling 'The Consul': Splitting Hairs," *New York Times*, 12 March 1950.

Robert Coleman of the *Daily Mirror* was more partisan, gleefully exclaiming that Menotti had delivered “a slashing operatic blow at totalitarianism,” which he went on to define as “Nazism, Black Fascism and Red Fascism, or Communism, if you prefer.” He did not stop there:

We hope all the local comrades who think life behind the Iron Curtain is just dandy will see “The Consul.” It might help to open the eyes of these dim-witted dupes, and it will certainly make good Americans proud of their democratic Republic.²²²

Coleman touted a similar message in his review of the NYCO’s 1957 production of *The Consul* in Central Park:

Gian-Carlo Menotti’s “The Consul” will be timely as long as there are totalitarian states and people with the courage to seek escape from them. Many are not successful, and meet tragic ends. But their love of freedom is moving, indeed.²²³

Interestingly, reviewers generally did not dwell on the fact that Menotti’s portrayal of the supposedly American Consulate and its bureaucratic hoops also painted an unflattering portrait of the United States and its policies. Richard Watts, Jr. said only that *The Consul* “dramatiz[ed] at once the horror of a police state and the unfeeling inhumanity of diplomatic red tape.”²²⁴ He continued, noting how the opera “shifts back and forth between a home shadowed by the secret police and the consulate of some happier land.”²²⁵ Yet Watts refused to explicitly name or hold accountable that “happier land.” In a sense, Watts was following Menotti’s lead, for Menotti’s libretto referred simply to that totalitarian country, “somewhere in Europe.”

At least one exception occurred in 1953, when Zechariah Chafee, Jr., a University Professor at Harvard, contributed a review of a 1952 bulletin entitled *American Visa Policy and*

²²² Robert Coleman, “‘Consul’ a Dramatic Blast at Butalitarian Rule,” *Daily Mirror*, 16 March 1950.

²²³ Robert Coleman, “‘Consul’ in Park Real Spellbinder,” *Daily Mirror*, 8 September 1957.

²²⁴ Richard Watts Jr., “A Police State in Musical Drama,” *New York Post Home News*, 16 March 1950.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Foreign Scientists to the University of Pennsylvania Law Review.²²⁶ Chafee summarized the periodical's findings, explaining how scientists from both inside and outside the country were being prevented "from crossing the frontiers of the United States in either direction for the purpose of furthering the advance of knowledge."²²⁷ He charged:

It is high time that thoughtful American citizens knew what our country is actually doing because of its fear of communism.²²⁸

A few pages later, he made reference to *The Consul*:

The Bulletin shows how often these great foreign scientists have been subjected by our consuls and other officials to the run-around. Anybody who has been shocked by Menotti's opera "The Consul" will see its scenes re-enacted in these pages.²²⁹

Chafee clearly did not regard *The Consul* as pro-American propaganda; indeed, he used the opera to make a statement about the detrimental impact of the anti-communist sentiment enveloping the United States. Yet Chafee appears to have been in the minority. Moreover, although he offered this reading just three years after *The Consul's* premiere, his words resonated within a vastly different political context. By March 1953, the Korean War, which had broken out during *The Consul's* Broadway run, was coming to a close, and Senator Joseph McCarthy was well into his anti-communist crusade in Washington.²³⁰ Chafee may have had the beginnings of historical distance

²²⁶ See Zechariah Chafee, Jr., "Book Reviews: American Visa Policy and Foreign Scientists," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 101, no. 5 (March 1953): 703-713.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 703.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 705.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 711.

²³⁰ I suspect that the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 likely gave Menotti's story—and its implications in terms of the question of American influence worldwide—greater poignancy during its initial run on Broadway.

in 1953, but the majority of viewers in 1950 appear to have been swept up by the notion that the opera proved America's superiority.

The Consul's Family and Gender Politics

Critics who advertised *The Consul's* supposedly pro-American bent were able to do so because Menotti's story underscored midcentury notions of family and gender which had themselves become entwined with the American agenda during the Cold War. As historian Elaine Tyler May has shown, during the 1950s, the idealized nuclear family was seen as a bulwark against communism in the United States. May notes how "Americans married at a higher rate and at a younger age than did their European counterparts" during the early Cold War.²³¹ Connecting this trend in part to anxiety about the spread of communism, she suggests that "the family seemed to offer a psychological fortress" while "the Soviet Union loomed in the distance as an abstract symbol of what Americans might face if they became 'soft.'"²³²

Thus *The Consul* helped to define the American family by staging a vision of its endangered European counterpart. The Sorels are a broken family living in a broken country. Indeed, this country cannot provide for or protect its citizens. As historian Tara Zahra points out, in the aftermath of World War II, "the tragic physical and mental state of Europe's children, in

²³¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Fully Revised and Updated 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988, 1999, 2008), 3. In 1994, Joanne Meyerowitz cautioned against what she saw as oversimplification in post-war narratives like May's, arguing: "While no serious historian can deny the conservatism of the postwar era or the myriad constraints that women encountered, an unrelenting focus on women's subordination erases much of the history of the postwar years. It tends to downplay women's agency and to portray women primarily as victims." Moreover, "the sustained focus on a white middle-class domestic ideal and on suburban middle-class housewives sometimes renders other ideals and other women invisible." See "Introduction: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, edited by Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 4.

²³² May, *Homeward Bound*, 12-13. May argues that "domestic ideology emerged as a buffer" against both political and sexual tendencies associated with communism.

particular, spawned dystopian fears of European civilization in disarray,” adding to the “widespread consensus that the Second World War had destroyed the family as completely as Europe’s train tracks, factories, and roads.”²³³ Relatedly, in her study of American propaganda during the Cold War, historian Laura A. Belmonte explains how U.S. information officials sought to define “America” as “an attractive alternative to life behind the Iron Curtain,” portraying “America” as a country in which “men were able to take care of their wives and children,” “women devoted themselves to their families and their communities,” and “the state protected families.”²³⁴ Much of *The Consul’s* early reception suggests that it was understood within this culture of propaganda. Menotti’s women, Magda and the Secretary, are crucial in this respect, as they stand very much apart from certain mid-century gender ideals.

Magda contrasts sharply with the image of the beautiful and capable American housewife touted by popular media during the 1950s.²³⁵ As May points out, after World War II, homemaking for American women became “purposeful” and “professionalized”; wives were expected to

²³³ Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families After World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 4. Zahra cites Alice A. Bailey, *The Problem of the Children in the World Today: Essentials of Post War Education* (New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1946).

²³⁴ Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 137. Notions of what the US had to offer in terms of family feature prominently in Christina Klein’s “attempt to explain the relationship between the expansion of U.S. power into Asia between 1945 and 1961 and the simultaneous proliferation of popular American representations of Asia.” See *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5. Among the “representations” that Klein examines are Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), and *Flower Drum Song* (1958).

²³⁵ In 1963, Betty Friedan famously criticized women’s magazines of the 1950s for crafting an image of women as “young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home.” See *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963, 1974, 1991, 1997, 2013), 27. Seeking to “test generalizations about postwar mass culture” as promulgated by Friedan, Joanne Meyerowitz argued that her own sample of much of the same popular literature “did not simply glorify domesticity or demand that women return to or stay at home. All of the magazines sampled advocated both the domestic and the nondomestic, sometimes in the same sentence.” See “Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958,” in *Not June Cleaver*, 231.

demonstrate “expertise in dealing with the possibility of nuclear war.”²³⁶ Losing simultaneously her family and her sanity, Magda is hardly capable of dealing with any such crisis. Thus she serves as a foil for the American wife and mother. When Neway performed the role in the 1960 film for television, she darted around the stage frantically, repeatedly raking her hands through her disheveled hair; just before the climax of Magda’s mad scene, Neway sang with eyes wide with fear and lack of sleep, lamenting the death of her child and the endless paperwork that is to blame.²³⁷

Throughout *The Consul*, the Secretary acts as the primary antagonist. It is she who appears to bar Magda’s escape. In 1950, a writer for *Newsweek* referred to her as “a mistress of red tape.”²³⁸ Menotti’s characterization of the Secretary, which borders on misogyny, is in fact very much in line with conceptions about working women following World War II.²³⁹ The secretary is the epitome of the dispassionate working girl. As May notes, while working women were celebrated in American popular media during the 1930s and 1940s, “the emancipated heroine did not survive in peacetime,” and “after the war, less positive images of women began to appear in films.”²⁴⁰

²³⁶ May, *Homeward Bound*, 99.

²³⁷ See Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Consul: A Musical Drama in Three Acts* (Pleasantville, NY: Video Artists International DVD 4266, 1960, 2004).

²³⁸ “Opera’s Heir Presumptive,” *Newsweek*, 27 March 1950, p. 82. Commentator John Chapman congratulated Gloria Lane for her portrayal of the “cold-hearted consular secretary whose job finally gets her down and makes her cry in anguish.” See “Menotti’s ‘The Consul’ Brilliant; Patricia Neway a Dramatic Find,” *New York Daily News*, 16 March 1950.

²³⁹ It is important to note that misogynistic characterizations were not unprecedented in Menotti’s operas. In his opera blog, Patrick Hansen, Director of Opera McGill described *The Telephone* (1947) as a “terrible, slightly misogynistic look at a woman obsessed with her telephone.” Hansen charged: “It’s not an uncanny pre-cursor op-ed on why social media is disconnecting all of us from each other. It’s an un-funny look at a woman who lies, chatters about without any thoughts in her head, and then is asked for her hand in marriage by a loser named Ben.” See “Patrick’s Opera Blog: Why Menotti’s Operas Are Flawed,” Tuesday, 5 November 2013, <http://patricksooperablog.blogspot.com/2013/11/why-menotti-operas-are-flawed.html> (accessed 1 May 2017).

²⁴⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 62. May describes how after World War II, single women “became targets of government-sponsored campaigns urging women back into their domestic roles” (p. 70).

Menotti's Secretary conforms to this less positive image. She is impatient and barely cares to look at the people who seek her assistance in the waiting room. Throughout the opera, she sings primarily in an angular, perfunctory recitative, and she is unmoved by the emotional outpourings that the other characters sing. In Act I, Scene II, she mocks a woman who approaches her desk but speaks no English: "Oh, dear! You . . . you "non capisco," eh?"²⁴¹ Then she sighs and asks in exasperation: "Is there anyone in this room who can understand her?"²⁴² Later on in the scene, Magda comes up to the desk, but the Secretary ignores her, flirting instead with someone over the phone. According to Menotti's stage directions, the Secretary answers the phone and "laughs coquettishly."²⁴³ After she hangs up, she turns to Magda, "with cold efficiency again," and asks: "Yes?"²⁴⁴ The Secretary regards Magda as little more than a nuisance. In the 1963 Austrian televised production, director Rudolph Cartier highlighted her aloof and detached nature by having Gloria Lane play the role in dark sunglasses.²⁴⁵

Thus commentators who approached *The Consul* as pro-American propaganda were aided by Menotti's updated employment of opera's gender conventions, namely the tragic heroine and the villainess. Moreover, by vilifying the Secretary, more so than the Consul or his country, Menotti was able to shift blame away from the United States, mapping it instead onto a female

²⁴¹ Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Consul: Musical Drama in Three Acts, Libretto* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1950), 15.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁴⁵ See Gian Carlo Menotti and Rudolph Cartier, *Der Konsul* (Halle/Saale: Arthaus Musik, 2010). This DVD was originally produced as a motion picture in 1963. Gloria Lane played the secretary in the original Broadway production of *The Consul* as well.

body. Magda's body was certainly commandeered in this way. In 1950, music critic Richard Watts Jr. described Magda as "both an appealing human being and a moving symbol of the unhappy womanhood of a tortured continent."²⁴⁶ In 1974, Neway spoke about Magda's import:

There are very few roles that are that fabulous. It's a role that has all the great qualities of a human being, with the exception of the fact that Magda commits suicide.²⁴⁷

Neway stumbled somewhat as she went on about Magda's suicide:

You know that the story of *THE CONSUL* was inspired by a notice in the newspaper that [Menotti] had read, about a woman committing suicide. But, as it turned out, Magda became stronger as a character . . . and then to have such a monument of strength commit suicide became something of a sticky thing.²⁴⁸

Neway's words are fascinating because they suggest that Menotti did not really understand "his" own character. In other words, the official author got it wrong. Neway, the unofficial yet perhaps more insightful author—given that she had access to the role of Magda through the act of performance over a period of more than ten years—claimed a superior understanding of "Menotti's" character. In fact, she usurped that character.

Neway did not expand on her discomfort with Menotti's conclusion, but she may have sensed how in this characteristically operatic act Menotti rendered Magda, and by extension, "somewhere in Europe," inherently powerless. According to philosopher Catherine Clément, operatic heroines are often "foreigners," explaining:

That is what catches them in a social system that is unable to tolerate their presence for fear of repudiating itself . . . You will see: their foreignness is not always geographical; it appears in a detail, a profession, an age no longer said to be womanly. But always, by some

²⁴⁶ Richard Watts Jr., "A Police State in Musical Drama," *New York Post Home News*, 16 March 1950.

²⁴⁷ Neway, interview with Gruen, 3-4.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

means or other, they cross over a rigorous, invisible line, the line that makes them unbearable; so they will have to be punished.²⁴⁹

Magda's "foreignness" is both geographical and gendered. By the end of the opera, Magda does not fit the mid-century ideal of American motherhood. Thus Menotti must eliminate her somehow, even though as Neway points out, someone like Magda might not have succumbed to kill herself. Neway's critique of Menotti's solution is reminiscent of musicologist Susan McClary's critique of the violent conclusion of Richard Strauss's *Salome* (1905). McClary writes that "the final purging of Salome's chromaticism . . . can be seen as an act of extraordinary hypocrisy."²⁵⁰

Menotti's Music: Between Opera and Broadway

In 1950, the political potency of Menotti's libretto was enormously contingent on the appeal of the music. Menotti sought to make the music in his opera widely palatable, causing some reviewers to put aside or at least dampen their suspicions towards opera. Robert Coleman, for example, assured readers of the *Daily Mirror*: "Though the Menotti work is in operatic form, it also is terrific theatre."²⁵¹ Coleman's words betray just a touch of aversion toward opera, and to be sure, at midcentury, there were plenty of Americans who scoffed at opera as a decadent import and/or viewed American opera as an inferior imitation of a European genre. Menotti was certainly aware of this attitude, and his forays on Broadway are often cited as a composer's calculated attempt to

²⁴⁹ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing, with a foreword by Susan McClary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 59.

²⁵⁰ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 101. She explains further that "this imposition of closure . . . represents stylistic cowardice at a time when resistance against convention was most highly prized among artists."

²⁵¹ Coleman, "Consul' a Dramatic Blast at Butalitarian Rule."

circumvent this very problem.²⁵² In 1985, when asked by Ardoin what appeal Broadway held for him, Menotti responded:

I simply wanted to experiment and see if operas could be taken out of the opera house and run the way plays run—with consecutive performances—and be accepted by a so-called non-operatic audience . . . But it had nothing to do with Broadway *per se*. It could have been done in any theater in any city.²⁵³

Despite this claim, *The Consul's* success had much to do with the current Broadway culture. As Neway put it, the immediate post-war era was “a very special time in the Broadway scene.”²⁵⁴ A number of works that straddled the line between opera and musical theater including Kurt Weill’s *Street Scene* (1946) and *Lost in the Stars* (1949), Marc Blitzstein’s *Regina* (1948), Benjamin Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), and Leonard Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti* (1955) and *Candide* (1956) played on Broadway.²⁵⁵ These productions were not all wildly popular, yet their existence speaks to a vast landscape for musical theater.

Even so, Neway admitted that she was initially shocked by *The Consul's* success on Broadway. Neway explained that when she sang in Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia* at the Ziegfeld Theatre in 1948:

We never expected it to be a commercial success. And it wasn’t. With THE CONSUL we expected the same.²⁵⁶

²⁵² Wlaschin begins his book on Menotti as follows: “Gian Carlo Menotti took opera out of the opera houses and gave it back to the general public. His operas were sung in English and heard on radio, staged on Broadway, composed for television, made into movies, presented in cathedrals and rewritten for children.” See *Giano Carlo Menotti on Screen*, 3.

²⁵³ Menotti, quoted in Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti*, 99-100.

²⁵⁴ Neway, interview with Gruen, 3.

²⁵⁵ For a discussion of the overlap between opera and Broadway during this time, see Lynch, “Opera and Broadway: The Debate Over the Essence of Opera in New York City, 1900-1960.” See also Larry Stempel, “Opera, In Our Own Way” in *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 367-407.

²⁵⁶ Neway, interview with Gruen, 3.

But that did not turn out to be the case, as Neway recalled:

We opened in Philadelphia. (We postponed for 2 weeks because Gian Carlo hadn't finished the last act.) We played in Philly for 10 days, and it was a raving success – a huge success. Then we came to N.Y., still not dreaming it would be a commercial success. But it was fantastically successful. It paid-off in 4 months.²⁵⁷

Thus Menotti's achievement was his ability to craft opera that could flourish, rather than merely exist on a Broadway that could handle hybrid artistic expression.

This achievement is all the more impressive when one considers the archival evidence that suggests *The Consul* premiered on Broadway by accident. According to Morton Baum's unpublished history of the New York City Center, preserved in the Heddy Baum Papers at the New York Public Library, Menotti originally planned for the NYCO to premiere *The Consul*, a circumstance which would have sent vastly different cultural signals.²⁵⁸ By the late 1940s, the NYCO had proven an ardent supporter of Menotti's work, having produced *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, *The Old Maid and the Thief*, *The Medium*, and *The Telephone*. During the winter of 1949, *The Medium* and *The Telephone* fared well with the company, running for "5 successive weeks, and even at the average gross of \$15,000 a week, manag[ing] to earn a small rental," according to Baum.²⁵⁹ Thus Menotti had reason to expect that the NYCO would do well by his new opera. As Baum recalled:

Gian-Carlo Menotti was anxious to work out an arrangement by which the City Opera would be the theatre to present his projected new opera, "The Consul." But [Laszlo] Halasz, unfortunately, sought to drive too hard a bargain with Chandler Cowles, the

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 3.

²⁵⁸ See Morton Baum, History, Box 3, Heddy Baum Papers, JPB 91-112, Music Division, New York Public Library. Morton Baum was chair of the New York City Center's Finance Committee and later the Center's managing director. Morton Baum's papers are under the name of his wife, Heddy Baum, because she donated them to her collection.

²⁵⁹ Baum, History, Folder 4, Box 3 (History, 1948-49), p. 212.

producer, so that negotiations collapsed altogether. This was unfortunate, for “The Consul” was subsequently produced on Broadway with much success.²⁶⁰

It is hardly surprising that critics initially hailed *The Consul* as an opera, since Menotti apparently wrote the work with the opera house and its audience in mind. *The Consul*'s run on Broadway ought to be viewed as both fortuitous and fortunate, for it likely fueled Americans' appreciation of opera's potential relevance and accessibility.

At the same time, Menotti and several of his colleagues have insisted that the composer's avoidance of the term “opera” played a key role in *The Consul*'s success. For example, in March 1950, Menotti's publisher at G. Schirmer made coy reference to *The Consul* in an article in *Opera News*:

A little while ago I was present at an audition for one of the serious musicals that are now conquering Broadway and that, for all practical purposes, are nothing but a new, contemporary style of American opera, written in English for American audiences, no matter what word they use for disguise.

After he had finished playing I went over to the composer to tell him that I liked his work. “You have written a fine opera,” I said innocently. He put a warning finger over his lips, looked around to make sure that nobody had heard what I had said and whispered “For heaven's sake, don't say the naughty word.”²⁶¹

More recently, Julius Rudel, longtime conductor and director of the NYCO, recalled that Menotti considered the word opera “box office poison,” explaining that “this was why he chose to bill his works as *musical dramas* and premiere them on Broadway.”²⁶² As I have shown, however, it is not

²⁶⁰ Baum, History, Folder 6, Box 3 (History, 1949-50), p. 230-231. Laszlo Halasz (1905-2001) was a Hungarian-born director, conductor, and pianist. Appointed in 1943, he was the first director of the NYCO. He left the NYCO in 1951.

²⁶¹ H.W. Heinsheimer, “The Future of Opera in America,” *Opera News*, 6 March 1950, p. 11, 29-30.

²⁶² Julius Rudel and Rebecca Paller, *First and Lasting Impressions: Julius Rudel Look Back on a Life in Music* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 52. Rudel also noted how prior to the NYCO's first all American opera season, sponsored by the Ford Foundation in 1958, there remained “scoffers who denied the existence of such a thing as “American Opera.” (pg. 73) Julius Rudel (1921-2014) began his career as a rehearsal pianist for the NYCO in 1944

clear that anyone was actually fooled by Menotti's designation. In the analysis that follows, I argue that Menotti's approach to operatic composition was what appealed to or fooled audiences, not his terminology. While *The Consul* includes several of the hallmarks of opera, most notably an opera buffa number and a chilling mad scene, Menotti also makes overtures to those less versed in the opera tradition, including a bit of translated Italian opera and a contemporary popular song, pre-recorded and played backstage. In this way, Menotti expanded and explained the operatic medium, and in the process, he helped to endear the genre to American audiences.

"Tu reviendras"

The Consul begins, not in the world of grand opera with an overture played by the orchestra in the pit, but instead with a pre-recorded popular song that is played backstage. As Menotti's stage directions indicate, the opening scene takes place in "the home of John Sorel, a small, shabby apartment in a large European city . . . When the curtain rises, the room is empty and dark. It is early morning, the windows are open, and the music of a record played in a café on the street can be heard."²⁶³ The song that wafts onto the stage and into the Sorel's apartment is "Tu reviendras," a skillful imitation of a French cabaret song that Menotti composed specifically for the black nightclub singer Mabel Mercer (1900-1984), who recorded the song's opening (and only) strain.²⁶⁴

and gradually rose through the ranks of the company. See Robert D. McFadden, "Julius Rudel, Longtime Impresario and Conductor of City Opera, Dies at 93," *New York Times*, 26 June 2014.

²⁶³ Menotti, *The Consul*, *Libretto*, 5.

²⁶⁴ Mabel Mercer was born in Staffordshire, England in 1900; her mother was vaudeville performer and her father (whom she never met), an African American jazz musician. Mercer moved to New York in 1938, becoming an American citizen in 1952. Henry Pleasants writes that "her ability to convey the emotional sense of a song influenced many other performers, notably Frank Sinatra, Billie Holiday, Peggy Lee and Tony Bennett." See Henry Pleasants, "Mercer, Mabel," *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed 1 May 2017) <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/47024>. On Mercer's contribution to *The Consul*, see Margaret Cheney, *Midnight at Mabel's: The Mabel Mercer Story, Centennial Biography of the Great Song Stylist* (Washington, DC, New Voyage Publishing, 2000), 159-161; James Haskins, *Mabel Mercer: A Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1987), 81-82.

Menotti likely got the idea to import an imitation of a popular song into his opera from Leonard Bernstein, who had employed the technique in his 1944 ballet *Fancy Free*. As Carol J. Oja points out, *Fancy Free* begins with a blues recording played backstage.²⁶⁵ Bernstein composed this number, which he called “Big Stuff” with African American jazz singer Billie Holiday (1915-1959) in mind; ultimately, however, Bernstein’s sister Shirley recorded the song for the *Fancy Free*’s premiere.²⁶⁶ Although I have not located evidence proving that Menotti saw *Fancy Free* in 1944, it is highly probable; Menotti and Bernstein ran in many of the same artistic circles, and they were both active in New York’s ballet scene during the mid-1940s. In fact, Menotti’s own ballet, *Sebastian*, premiered in New York the same year as *Fancy Free*.²⁶⁷

Menotti’s diegetic employment of contemporary popular song at the beginning of *The Consul* serves to ground the drama firmly in the present—both in terms of its aesthetic and its technology—as well as the ordinary or everyday.²⁶⁸ At the same time, “Tu reviendras” also reeks of an old world order, its melancholy phrases calling to mind the cabaret songs of the World War II era²⁶⁹ (Example 1.1). William Hawkins described “Tu reviendras” as follows:

²⁶⁵ See Carol J. Oja, *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32-34.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶⁷ See John Martin, “Ballet by Caton on Week-End Bill: ‘Sebastian,’ a New Work, and Season’s First ‘Barn Dance Novelties on Program,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1944.

²⁶⁸ Oja explains how Bernstein achieved a similar affect through “Big Stuff” in *Fancy Free*. She writes: “When the curtain rose on the first production of *Fancy Free*, the audience at the old Metropolitan Opera House did not hear a pit orchestra, which would have followed a long-established norm in ballet. Rather, a recorded vocal blues wafted from the stage. Those attending must have been caught by surprise, as they were drawn into a contemporary sound world.” See *Bernstein Meets Broadway*, 32.

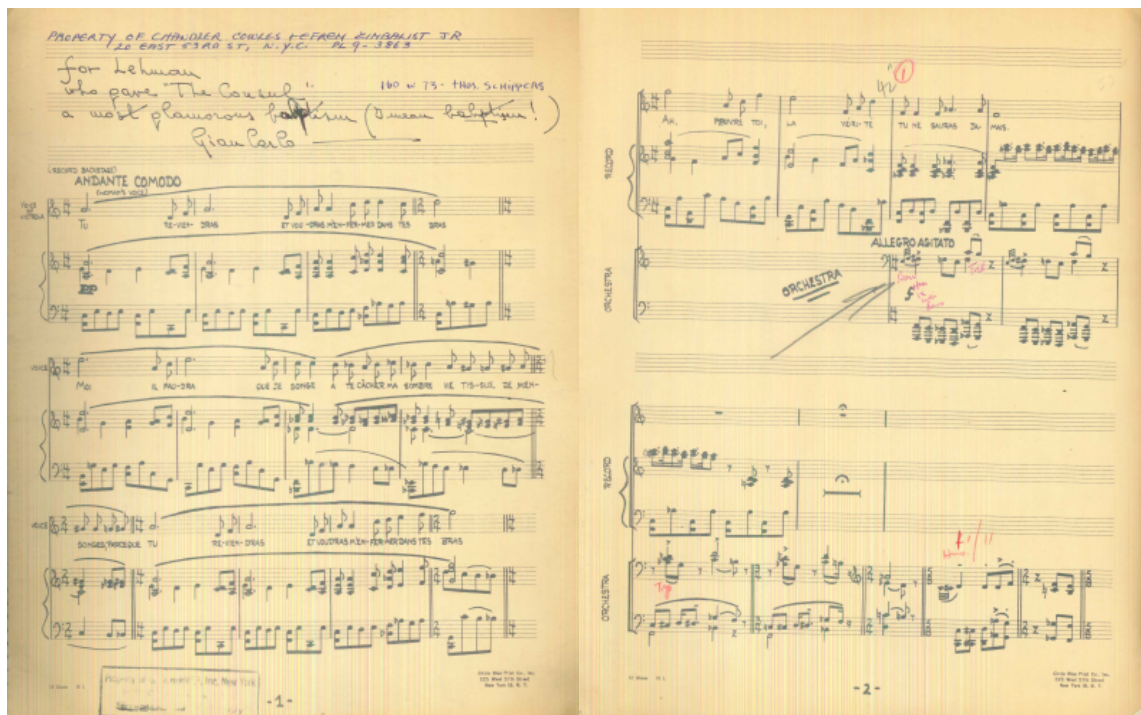
²⁶⁹ As Lisa Appignanesi notes in her history of cabaret, “in popular usage ‘cabaret’ conjures up visions of sleazy strip joints on dank city streets.” See *The Cabaret* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975, 2004), 1. Menotti may have used this bit of a cabaret-style song to conjure for listeners the dangerous, seedy world from which Magda was trying to escape.

Here is a sharp imitation of one of those insidious, cheap, self-pitying, guttersnipe melodies, at which no one can top the French. As sung by Mabel Mercer, it captures the sirenish resignation that makes the song so loathsome.²⁷⁰

Hawkins found “Tu reviendras” objectionable yet effective, and perhaps in post-war fashion, he used it as an opportunity to mock the French.

Example 1.1

“Tu Reviendras”²⁷¹



“Tu Reviendras” continues as John Sorel makes his entrance accompanied by the orchestra, which begins “at its own tempo,” according to the published score.²⁷² The song

²⁷⁰ William Hawkins, “The Consul’ Hits Where We Live,” *New York World Telegram*, located without a date in Mabel Mercer’s Papers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, cited in Haskins, *Mabel Mercer*, 81.

²⁷¹ Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Consul, Act I, Vocal Score*, Large Bound Copy of Handwritten Voice and Piano Reduction, p. 1, includes handwritten dedication: “For Lehman who gave The Consul a most pla...orous baptism,” Box 37, LEP.

²⁷² See Menotti, *The Consul: Musical Drama in Three Acts, Revised Edition, Piano-Vocal Score*, 2.

concludes three measures into the orchestral interruption. John’s leg is bleeding from a gunshot wound, and he staggers about the room, accompanied by a cacophony of sounds from the orchestra. As indicated by the stage directions, John “drags himself to a chair and lies across it, gasping for breath,” accompanied only by the piano in the pit, and “the record begins to play again.”²⁷³ The orchestra rests, and John shouts for Magda over the sound of the record. Magda and John’s mother rush into the room and frantically try to help him. The three converse anxiously, and John begins to explain what has happened to him. All the while, “Tu reviendras” plays in the background, indifferent to the chaos on stage. Finally, Magda tells John’s mother to close the window, “shutting out the sound of the record.”²⁷⁴ At this point, the orchestra comes back into the story, offering a low, ominous tremolo (Example 1.2).

Example 1.2

Reprise of “Tu reviendras”²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Ibid., 3.

²⁷⁴ Menotti, *The Consul*, Libretto, 6.

²⁷⁵ Menotti, *The Consul*, Act I, Vocal Score, Large Bound Copy of Handwritten Voice and Piano Reduction, pp. 3-5.

“Tu reviendras” returns at the beginning of Act II. After pleading in vain with the Secretary, Magda returns to her family’s apartment. She is tired and frustrated, and now “Tu reviendras” grates on her nerves: “Oh, that song! . . . again and again . . .” she complains.²⁷⁶ As in Act I, she must close the window to silence the world outside her apartment. The recurrence of “Tu reviendras” serves Menotti’s drama both structurally and thematically, working as a framing device for Acts 1 and 2 and helping to establish the monotony of Magda’s struggle. Magda and the other visa seekers visit the consulate day after day, each visit the same, much like the popular song that plays on repeat at the café. After Act II, “Tu reviendras” is never heard again. Yet the song remains significant, demonstrating how Menotti was willing to make space in his operas for what Americans would immediately identify as distinctly non-operatic song.²⁷⁷

Despite the fact that non-operatic song had been employed in numerous operas in the past, many reviewers commented on the recorded song’s inclusion during the early 1950s, labeling it an operatic innovation.²⁷⁸ William Hawkins described *The Consul*’s opening as “a shocker.”²⁷⁹ Writing for *Musical America*, Robert Sabin argued:

²⁷⁶ Menotti, *The Consul*, *Libretto*, 22.

²⁷⁷ See Carolyn Abbate’s discussion of song in opera in *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 69-118.

²⁷⁸ In addition to the fact that the ballet *Fancy Free* (1944) opens similarly to *The Consul*, radios and phonographs had previously been incorporated into opera as well, particularly in *Zeitoper*, a genre associated with Weimar Germany, which as Alexander Rehding explains, may be “broadly characterized by its commitment to represent everyday events of contemporary life.” Rehding writes about a gramophone recording that is played onstage in Kurt Weill’s *Der Zar lä(s)t sich photographieren* (1928). See “On the Record,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 59. On *Zeitoper*, see also Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitoper of Krenek, Weill and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988); Frank Mehring, “Welcome to the Machine! The Representation of Technology in *Zeitoper*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11 (1999): 159-178; Joseph Henry Auner, “‘Soulless Machines’ and Steppenwolves: Renegotiating Masculinity in Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf*,” in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, edited by Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 222-236.

²⁷⁹ William Hawkins, “The Consul’ a Hit; Electrifies Audiences,” *New York World-Telegram*, 16 March 1950.

The use of a recording by Mabel Mercer to open Acts I and II, with the voice drifting out over an empty stage at the beginning, is one of the brilliant touches of theatre in the production.²⁸⁰

In 1951, British critic Arthur Benjamin, while asserting Menotti's debt to older composers such as Verdi and Puccini, also marveled:

Tradition apart, how many brilliant and original inventions are found in this opera! That silly, heartless popular song in French played (in the wings) on a café gramophone and the shock when Sorel stumbles, wounded, into the room, at the beginning, just as one is wondering why the record is being played...²⁸¹

Writer George Whitney Martin later mistakenly wrote that "the recorded song heard twice in the opera" was "a nightclub favorite of the period."²⁸² In fact, "Tu reviendras" was never heard outside *The Consul*. Menotti never even completed the song.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Menotti believed the song inseparable from his opera. Menotti recalled to Gruen that Mercer "begged" him to complete "Tu reviendras" so that she could sing it in her nightclub appearances.²⁸³ Menotti explained that he "purposely left it unfinished."²⁸⁴ According to Mercer's biographer James Haskins, Menotti "did not want it sung by

²⁸⁰ Robert Sabin, "Menotti's *The Consul* Begins New York Run On Broadway," *Musical America*, 15 March 1950, p. 7.

²⁸¹ Arthur Benjamin, "The Consul," *Music & Letters* 32, no. 3 (1951): 249.

²⁸² George Whitney Martin, *Twentieth Century Opera: A Guide* (New York: Proscenium Publishers, 1999), 465.

²⁸³ Menotti, quoted in Gruen, *Menotti*, 98. By 1950, Mercer had become something of a star in the New York nightclub scene, and singers such as Frank Sinatra regularly sought her out so that they could listen to and learn her songs. See Haskins, *Mabel Mercer*, 107. On the homepage of its website, the Mabel Mercer Foundation proudly boasts this Frank Sinatra quote: "Everything I learned I owe to Mabel Mercer." Founded in 1985, the Mercer Foundation "serves to both perpetuate the memory and spirit of its legendary namesake and to promote public interest in classic popular song and the art of cabaret." See <http://www.mabelmercer.org/> (accessed 1 May 2017).

²⁸⁴ Menotti, quoted in Gruen, 98. Menotti explained: "In the opera the song is never sung to the end. I purposely left it unfinished. I've had many offers to finish it, so that it could be made into a pop song. Even Mabel Mercer herself, for whom I wrote it, begged me to finish it, so she could use it in her nightclub appearances. But I hate nightclubs, and so I never agreed." Despite this comment about his distaste for nightclubs, Menotti must have frequented them to some extent during the late 1940s. According to Cheney, Menotti was "inspired after hearing her sing." See *Midnight at Mabel's*, 160. Because Mercer rarely recorded, the nightclub is the only venue in which Menotti could have heard Mercer.

other singers or in other places.”²⁸⁵ Menotti’s refusal to allow “Tu Reviendras” to circulate outside *The Consul* suggests that the song truly was a song for the world inside the opera.²⁸⁶

Translating Opera

In addition to incorporating popular song into *The Consul*, Menotti also sought to translate opera to his American audience, alluding to one of its best-known practitioners in the United States. During her first trip to the consulate, Magda witnesses an anonymous Italian woman struggling to obtain a visa, in part because she cannot speak English. This anonymous Italian petitioner, labeled the “Foreign Woman” in the libretto, sings a lyric aria that is unmistakably reminiscent of Giacomo Puccini.²⁸⁷ In fact, the beginning of this number is strikingly similar to “O, mio babbino caro” from Puccini’s *Gianni Schicchi* (1918), both in terms of its opening melody and its purpose. “O mio babbino caro” opens in A-flat major with the following melodic line: 1, 1, 1, 3, 7, 6, 5 (Example 1.3). The foreign woman’s aria adheres to a similar melodic trajectory, moving from 1 to 5, and passing through the same scale degrees as “O mio babbino caro.” Beginning in C minor, the foreign woman’s aria unfolds as follows: 1, 3, 1, 7; 5, 6, 7, 1, 5, 5 (Example 1.4).

²⁸⁵ Haskins, *Mabel Mercer*, 82. As Haskins concludes, “Mabel had to be content with the knowledge that wherever *The Consul* was performed, her voice was part of it.”

²⁸⁶ Menotti’s refusal also demonstrates a troubling disregard for Mercer and for her craft. Mercer’s contribution to *The Consul* was significant, yet according to Cheney, Mercer was paid a flat sum of just \$100.00. See *Midnight at Mabel’s*, 161. As a black woman in the United States in 1950, however, Mercer had little control over the situation.

²⁸⁷ See the cast of characters in *The Consul*.

Example 1.3

Puccini's "O, mio babbino caro"

Andantino ingenuo ♩ = 120

Lauretta

Oh! mio bab - bi - no ca - ro, mi pia - ce, è bel - lo,

pp dolce

Lauretta

bel - lo; vo'an - da - rein Por - ta Ros - sa

pp

The image shows a musical score for the aria "O, mio babbino caro" by Giacomo Puccini. It is divided into two systems. The first system is for the character Lauretta and includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked "Andantino ingenuo" with a quarter note equal to 120 beats. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 8/8. The vocal line begins with "Oh! mio bab - bi - no ca - ro, mi pia - ce, è bel - lo,". The piano accompaniment starts with a *pp dolce* dynamic. The second system continues the vocal line with "bel - lo; vo'an - da - rein Por - ta Ros - sa" and the piano accompaniment, which includes a *pp* dynamic marking.

Example 1.4

The foreign woman's aria

Andante con moto ♩ = 66

For. W. Mio Si-gnor, io ven-go per mia fi - gia, l'un - i - ca mi - a cre - a -
 tu - ra. Fug-gi-da ca - sa con un dei vo-stri sol da ti

Mr. K. It's some-thing a-bout her daugh - ter. *sempre legato*

For. W. quan - do e-ra an - co - ra un - a bam - bi - na. Per tre
 Mr. K. It seems that she ran a-way with one of your

For. W. an - ni non eb - bi sue no - ti - zie;
 Mr. K. sol - diers.

These melodic similarities might be dismissed as mere coincidence, but both arias also serve a similar function within their respective operas. In *Gianni Schicchi*, Lauretta implores her father; she wants him to help the greedy relatives of the deceased Buoso Donati so that she can marry Rinuccio Donati. She tells her father that she will die if she cannot marry the man she loves. In

The Consul, the foreign woman pleads with the secretary because her daughter is ill and dying. The foreign woman seeks a visa so that she can go to her daughter and take care of her new grandson. In both cases, the arias serve as a plea for help in the name of family.

Menotti integrated an on-the-spot translation of this aria through Mr. Kofner, an elderly gentleman who volunteers to translate as the foreign woman pleads her case to the Secretary. The woman tells her story in regular four-bar phrases, and between each phrase, Mr. Kofner translates, summarizing in a bar of English. As the aria progresses, the overlap between Italian and English becomes greater and more complex. Yet Menotti takes care to foreground Mr. Kofner's English translation, gradually allowing the Italian text to fade into the background. Listeners need not struggle to understand a foreign language or follow along with a libretto; they may simply enjoy the sound of Italian opera, relying on Mr. Kofner for the plot content. In this way, Menotti managed to "translate" not only this particular moment but also opera more generally for his Broadway audience.

Channeling Puccini

In 1969, musicologist H. Wiley Hitchcock wrote about Menotti's success during the 1940s and 1950s, attributing it in part to his "Pucciniesque musical vocabulary."²⁸⁸ Sixteen years later, Menotti bristled when Ardoin asked him if the frequent comparisons of his music to Puccini's bothered him, sniping: "If some stupid critic insists in linking my music to Puccini, God bless him."²⁸⁹ Despite Menotti's protestations, his debt to Puccini, particularly in *The Consul* is clear,

²⁸⁸ H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 211.

²⁸⁹ Menotti, quoted in Ardoin, *The Stages of Menotti*, 37. Menotti argued: "The influence of Puccini on my music has been a slight one, mostly on my dramatic technique rather than my musical style . . . for music critics who specialize in musical genealogies, let me point out that my musical style owes little to Puccini. As any serious music student can see,

involving musical style, dramatic technique, and even plot device. In addition to the allusion to “O, mio babbino caro” discussed above, *The Consul*’s plot echoes Puccini’s *Tosca*. Set in Rome in 1800, *Tosca* begins with an escaped political prisoner. In the first scene, Cesare Angelotti, a member of the former Bonapartist government, rushes into the church of Sant’Andrea della Valle to hide, much like John Sorel, who rushes wounded into his apartment. Baron Scarpia, the Chief of the Secret Police, arrives later, looking for Angelotti. In *The Consul*, a Secret Police Agent arrives as well, questioning Magda and her mother-in-law as to John’s whereabouts. In Act II of *Tosca*, Scarpia interrogates the painter Cavaradossi, and *Tosca* can be heard singing at a royal gala in the same building. When Scarpia shuts the window, *Tosca*’s song fades, just as “Tu reviendras” does in *The Consul*.

If by the 1980s, Menotti actively sought to distance himself from Puccini, during the 1950s, this connection helped to ensure *The Consul*’s success. Puccini’s operas were incredibly popular in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. In his 1953 history of the Metropolitan Opera, Irving Kolodin identified the operas of Wagner, Verdi, and Puccini as the Met’s “nuclear core” by the mid-1930s.²⁹⁰ At mid-century, this core was much the same; Puccini’s operas were featured every season, and among them, *La Bohème* was staged most often, followed by *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca*.²⁹¹ In 1956, musicologist Joseph Kerman complained:

if anything, my melodic source springs more from Schubert, whose deceptively simple melodies still mesmerize me, and the declamatory style of Mussorgsky.”

²⁹⁰ Irving Kolodin, *The Story of the Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1950: A Candid History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 543.

²⁹¹ See Gerald Fitzgerald, ed., *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera: The Complete Chronicle of Performances and Artists* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1989). In 2005, William Berger attested to Puccini’s continued popularity in the United States, writing: “The numbers are unreliable, but I have read that one-fourth of all opera performances in the United States are of three of Puccini’s most popular operas (*La bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*.” (p. 5).

Puccini looms larger in American musical life than any contemporary composer, and also larger than Mozart or Wagner as opera composers. The second-rate is granted fantastic authority.²⁹²

Kerman also connected Menotti's appeal to "the persistence of the operas of Puccini and Strauss," charging disgustedly: "Menotti is a sensationalist in the old style, and in fact a weak one, diluting the faults of Strauss and Puccini with none of their fugitive virtues."²⁹³

Speaking from a more positive standpoint, other contemporary commentators also viewed Menotti as something of Puccini's heir. On 27 March 1950, a writer for *Time* described Menotti as "a master at writing Puccini-like melodrama and composing melody with Puccini-like appeal."²⁹⁴

That same day, someone in *Newsweek* asserted:

Menotti may or may not turn out to be America's first really important operatic composer. That decision does not rest with current critics or audiences. But until somebody else proves a better right to the title, Menotti must be considered the heir presumptive.²⁹⁵

Reporting on *The Consul's* run at the Cambridge Theatre in London in 1951, Arthur Benjamin commented on "the letter duet in the second scene for the Italian mother and her interpreter" in *Music & Letters*. "Puccini?" he asked. "Perhaps. Anyhow it is lovely and moving."²⁹⁶ In fact, Benjamin insisted that *The Consul* was "not English opera, not American opera," but emphatically

Berger went on to devote an entire chapter of his book to "Puccinian Permutations" in the United States, noting how these three operas in particular had seeped into various films and musicals. See *Puccini Without Excuses: A Refreshing Reassessment of the World's Most Popular Composer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

²⁹² Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 253.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁹⁴ "Red Tape," *Time*, March 27, 1950, p. 42-43.

²⁹⁵ "Opera's Heir Presumptive," p. 82-83.

²⁹⁶ Benjamin, "The Consul," 250.

“Italian,” arguing: “Menotti writes operatic music in the great tradition of Verdi and Puccini.”²⁹⁷

American critics might have agreed with Benjamin’s final statement; importantly, however, Menotti was continuing the “great” Italian tradition in the United States and making overtures to his newfound audience.

Operatic Convention in *The Consul*

Menotti was well versed in opera’s techniques and traditions, and *The Consul* includes familiar constructs from European opera, most importantly, two comic numbers for an opera buffa character and a chilling mad scene for the tragic heroine.²⁹⁸ Menotti introduces his buffa character, a magician named Nika Magadoff who is in search of a visa, near the end of Act I, and in Act II, the magician sings an extended comic number which becomes increasingly disconcerting and tragic as it unfolds.²⁹⁹ Magda’s mad scene follows on the heels of this transformation from comedy to tragedy.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 248-249.

²⁹⁸ Buffa arias are generally sung by comic characters (usually basso buffos) in eighteenth-century operas. Classic examples of such comic characters include Uberto in Pergolesi’s *La serva padrona* (1733), Leporello in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787), and Osmin in Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782). Puccini’s Gianni Schicchi (baritone) might be cited as a late example of the basso-buffo. Mad scenes also have a long operatic history. Although Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) is often cited as the prime example of an opera featuring a mad scene, the operatic preoccupation with madness dates back much further, as musicologist Ellen Rosand points out. In fact, in her discussion of portrayals of madness in operas by Monteverdi and Handel, Rosand suggests that “madness might be regarded as a particularly operatic condition,” noting that “irrational characters, featured in operas from the seventeenth century to the present, claim, by definition, the right to abnormal behavior; their instability legitimizes their singing.” See “Operatic Madness: A Challenge to Convention” in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, edited by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 241.

²⁹⁹ Interestingly, Menotti’s magician is a tenor, rather than a bass or baritone.

³⁰⁰ In the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Stephen A. Willier defines the mad scene as “an operatic scene in which a character, usually the soprano heroine, displays traits of mental collapse, for example through amnesia, hallucination, irrational behavior or sleepwalking.” Such scenes typically feature “elaborate coloratura writing and commonly the participation of a wind instrument, often the flute.” See “Mad scene,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, accessed 1 May 2017 <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O007756>.

Menotti uses the magician's first entrance in *The Consul* to flirt with the notion of operatic madness. The characters who seek help from the foreign consulate are living out a nightmare, a circumstance that Menotti highlights by invoking hypnosis as well as eerie dream sequences. The magician initiates the hypnotic scenes. Near the end of Act I, for example, he tries to playfully distract the other people in the waiting room. In dry recitative, he asks a woman whom Menotti initially referred to as the "Dark Woman":

Would you mind if I practiced one of my tricks on you? It would help us both pass the time.³⁰¹

The "Dark Woman" responds: "Oh no, please! I'm afraid of tricks."³⁰² The magician dismisses her concern:

Oh, but there is nothing to it! Do you see this little ball? Now you see it . . . now you don't. Now you see it . . . now you don't.³⁰³

The magician continues with his trick, repeating the phrase "Now you see it . . . now you don't." Each time, his words are punctuated by a recurring motive played by the flute, as indicated by Lehman Engel's markings in his copy of the score (Example 1.5).

³⁰¹ Menotti, *The Consul, Libretto*, 20. Menotti eventually gave the "Dark Woman" a name: Vera Boronel. Her name is included in both the libretto and the piano-vocal score that were published in 1950. In this section, in which I refer to Menotti's autograph score in my music examples, I will use the distinction "Dark Woman." Otherwise, I will use the name, Vera Boronel.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 20.

Example 1.5

“Now you see it . . . now you don’t”³⁰⁴

Handwritten musical score for Example 1.5. The score is on aged paper and features four staves. The top staff is labeled 'DARK W.' and contains a few notes. The second staff is labeled 'MAG.' and contains the lyrics: 'NOTHING TO IT! DO YOU SEE THIS LITTLE BALL? NOW YOU SEE IT.... NOW YOU DON'T.' Above the 'MAG.' staff, the word '(PARLATO)' is written. The third staff is labeled 'ORCH.' and contains a complex melodic line with handwritten red annotations 'Fl.' and 'ce.'.

Suddenly, the people in the waiting room begin to sing a quintet, which Menotti layers on top of the magician’s words and the flute’s incessant accompaniment (Example 1.6).³⁰⁵

Example 1.6

“In Endless Waiting Rooms”³⁰⁶

Handwritten musical score for Example 1.6. The score is on aged paper and features five staves. The top staff is labeled 'MAGDA' and contains a few notes. The second staff is labeled 'DARK W.' and contains the lyrics: 'IN END-LESS WAITING ROOMS THE HOUR STANDS STILL THE LIGHT GOES'. The third staff is labeled 'MAG.' and contains the lyrics: 'NOW YOU SEE IT... NOW YOU DON'T.' The fourth staff is labeled 'MR. K.' and contains the lyrics: 'NOW YOU SEE IT... NOW YOU DON'T.' The fifth staff is labeled 'ORCH.' and contains a complex melodic line with handwritten red annotations 'Fl' and 'Piano'. A circled number '97' is written above the 'MAGDA' staff.

³⁰⁴ Menotti, *The Consul*, Act I, Vocal Score, Large Bound Copy of Handwritten Voice and Piano Reduction, p. 81.

³⁰⁵ The flute’s accompaniment finally ceases at Rehearsal 98, when the magician joins the rest of the quintet, singing “We wait forever, wait in sunless rooms.” See Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Consul (Opera in Three Acts), Full Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1950), 160. I am grateful to G. Schirmer for lending me a perusal score to examine.

³⁰⁶ Menotti, *The Consul*, Act I, Vocal Score, Large Bound Copy of Handwritten Voice and Piano Reduction, p. 82.

The quintet is simple, featuring staggered entrances by the “Dark Woman,” the “Italian Woman,” Magda, and Mr. Kofner above the magician’s ostinato.³⁰⁷ The “Dark Woman” begins:

In endless waiting rooms
the hour stands still,
the light goes pale and thin,
the heart is dead.

We wait in wide-eyed sleep.
What are we waiting for?
Perhaps the creaking of a door
or the light-play on the wall.³⁰⁸

The voices continue in polyphony until Magda, the “Italian Woman,” and the magician demand together:

Oh, let all flags be burned
and guilt be shared.³⁰⁹

“My brother’s shame be mine,” begins Mr. Kofner. He is echoed by the “Italian Woman” and the “Dark Woman.” “And his my fare,” continues Mr. Kofner, repeating the phrase with the magician. The quintet concludes with a final solemn petition: “Oh, give us back the earth and make us free.” The flute’s presence at the beginning of this scene, coupled with the magician’s hypnotic words and gestures, recalls the tradition of operatic madness made so famous by Donizetti in his mad scene for Lucia in 1835.³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ In the 1950 published piano-vocal score and libretto, Menotti referred to the “Italian Woman” as the “Foreign Woman.” In the revised edition (1996) of the piano-vocal score, Menotti substituted Anna Gomez for the “Italian Woman.” See Menotti, *The Consul: Musical Drama in Three Acts, Revised Edition, Piano-Vocal Score*, 95-108.

³⁰⁸ Menotti, *The Consul, Libretto*, 20.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

³¹⁰ Lucia’s mad scene has received ample musicological attention. As William Ashbrook points out, the flute plays a crucial role, suggesting Lucia’s mental disorder. See “Lucia di Lammermoor,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/O004252> (accessed 1 May 2017). See also Hilary Poriss, “A Madwoman’s Choice: Aria Substitution in *Lucia di Lammermoor*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 13, no. 1 (2001): 1-28; Mary

“My Charming Ma’moiselle”

In Act II, scene 2, the magician returns for an extended number, this time hypnotizing the entire waiting room as he tries to impress the Secretary and thus, speed up the process of being granted a visa. The magician begins the scene in patter song, a staple of eighteenth-century opera buffa that in operatic terms renders him a pathetically comic character.³¹¹ Magadoff rattles off his credentials, one note per syllable, to the Secretary, who remains unmoved (Example 1.7).³¹² Finally, with a grand and decidedly exaggerated operatic vocal flourish, he announces that he will prove his skills (Example 1.8). First, he tries “prestidigitation.” When that fails, he moves on to hypnotism, beginning with Mr. Kofner:

Look into my eyes. Look into my eyes.
You feel tired; you want to sleep.
Breathe deeply. Breathe deeply.³¹³

Ann Smart, “The Silencing of Lucia,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 2 (1992): 119-141; McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 90-99.

³¹¹ According to *Grove Music Online*, patter song refers to “a comic song in which the humour derives from having the greatest number of words uttered in the shortest possible time.” During the second of the eighteenth century, “composers often introduced the idea into *buffo* solos.” See “Patter song,” *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/21090> (accessed 1 May 2017). Musicologist John Platoff describes “rapid patter” as one of the melodic styles “ubiquitous in comic numbers” in Mozart’s operas. See “The Buffa Aria in Mozart’s Vienna,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2, no. 2 (1990): 104. Mary Hunter also discusses the identifying characteristics of the “buffa aria,” pointing out that “the frantic comic piece for the *primo buffo* singer is perhaps the paradigmatic aria type for the whole genre of opera buffa . . . it emphasizes the genre’s preference for stage gesture and action over sheer vocal skills.” See *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart’s Vienna: A Poetics of Entertainment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 110.

³¹² As Hunter notes, buffa characters often construct lists or catalogues. She writes: “Favorite subjects for listing include countries visited or conquered, family trees, weapons owned and used, food eaten, and other pleasures enjoyed.” See *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart’s Vienna*, 124. In *The Consul*, the magician lists off the people he has performed for, including “the Prince and Princess Yusouppoff, and the Duke of Alba, and the Queen of Belgium – all the finest, all the richest, all the noblest people in the world.” See Menotti, *The Consul, Libretto*, 34-35.

³¹³ Menotti, *The Consul, Libretto*, 36.

Menotti sets the first two lines of the magician’s text to a single repeated G. On the third line, he begins a trance-inducing chromatic figure, first ascending and then descending (Example 1.9).

When the magician turns to Anna Gomez and Vera Boronel, hypnotizing them together, he sings the same text to the same musical phrase, beginning one step higher than before (Example 1.10).

Magda comes next, and again, the magician sings his spellbinding music and text, continuing the pattern of upward transposition. Finally, he turns to the foreign woman, singing yet another step higher and in her native language.³¹⁴ After he has put everyone to sleep, the magician turns back to the Secretary, explaining, “They are gone.”³¹⁵

Example 1.7

“My charming Ma’moiselle”

Allegro molto vivace e leggero

The musical score is for the piece "My charming Ma'moiselle" by Giuseppe Verdi, as indicated by the tempo marking "Allegro molto vivace e leggero". It features three vocal parts: Magician, Secretary (Sec.), and another Magician. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of three systems. The first system shows the Magician singing "My charm-ing Ma' moi-selle, you have the hon - or of speak-ing with no oth - er than" over a piano accompaniment marked *ppp*. The second system shows the Secretary singing "Who?" and the Magician singing "Ni - ka Ma - ga - doff. Yes, re - mem - ber -". The third system shows the Magician singing "Ni - ka Ma - ga - doff: Il - lu - sion - ist, te - lep - a - thist, and pre - ti - dig - i - ta - tor," with a piano accompaniment marked *mf*. The piano part features a prominent chromatic figure in the right hand, which is the subject of the text above.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 36. He sings: “Guardami negli occhi. Guardami negli occhi. Tu sei stanca e vuoi dormire.”

³¹⁵ Ibid., 36.

Example 1.8

Operatic Flourish in “My charming Ma’moiselle”

liberamente

Magician

Don't you know? Art is the art-ist's on - ly pass - port. Nev - er - the - less, if you're not con - vinced

Magician

that I am Ni - ka Ma - ga - doff, I shall prove it to you.

Example 1.9

“Look into my eyes” (first time)

Andante con moto

Magician

Look in - to my eyes. Look in - to my eyes. You feel tired; you

Magician

want to sleep. Breathe deep - ly. Breathe deep - ly.

Example 1.10

“Look into my eyes” (second time)

The image shows a musical score for a scene. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is for the character 'Magician' and includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has three measures with lyrics: 'Look in - to my eyes. Look in - to my eyes. You feel tired; you'. The piano accompaniment features a steady bass line and a more active treble line with chords and melodic fragments. The second system also features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has three measures with lyrics: 'want to sleep. Breathe deep - ly. Breathe deep - ly.' The piano accompaniment continues with similar harmonic support, including some rests in the vocal line.

Next, the magician initiates a dance. He describes a “lovely ballroom,” its floor shining “with precious marble” and instructs his subjects to bow to one another.³¹⁶ As soon as the scene is established, “the dance is on,” clearly marked by a switch from duple to triple meter.³¹⁷ Mr. Kofner dances with the foreign woman, Vera Boronel with Anna Gomez, and Magda dances alone. In the 1960 televised version, the characters move clumsily, as if sleepwalking. The effect is utterly unnerving, and eventually, even the Secretary is no longer amused. Menotti uses this initially comic, increasingly disconcerting scene to transition into Magda’s mad scene. As the magician’s number progresses, his predicament ceases to be funny and thus, leads seamlessly into Magda’s breakdown.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

Magda's Mad Scene

Magda's mad scene evolves gradually after the magician's exit. The scene begins in much the same way as Magda's previous visits to the Consulate. Magda approaches the Secretary's desk to ask if there is any news regarding her case. She and the Secretary go back and forth for some time, as Magda describes her deteriorating situation, and the Secretary responds with shrugs and sighs. Finally, Magda loses her temper. After a sudden crescendo of sixteenth notes in the orchestra, Magda screams, according to Menotti's stage directions "with sudden violence, almost startled by her own outburst": "Liar! Liar!"³¹⁸ Shocked, the Secretary responds: "If you behave like this, I must ask you to leave."³¹⁹ The Secretary's words demonstrate how she sees Magda as spinning out of control; no longer able to maintain her composure, Magda is behaving in a way deemed wholly unacceptable for a Consulate.

Magda responds to the Secretary's admonishment with "To this we've come," a binary-form aria which exposes not only Magda's mental instability but also, a more global insanity. Magda begins by describing the sorry state of the world in overlapping two-bar phrases in a gentle D major, as if as at a distance:

To this we've come:
that men withhold the world from men.³²⁰

Magda concludes the A section of the aria in E-flat major with a bitter warning to the secretary:

"You, you, too, shall weep" (Example 1.11).³²¹

³¹⁸ Ibid., 40.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

³²⁰ Ibid., 41.

³²¹ Ibid., 41.

Example 1.11

“To this we’ve come”

Adagio ma non troppo

Magda

To this we've come: that men with-hold the world from men. No ship nor shore for him who drowns at sea. No home nor Grave for him who dies on land. To this we've come: that man be born a stran-ger up-on God'searth, that he be cho - sen with-out a chance for choice, that he be hunt - ed with-out the hope of

p *mp*

poco rit. *a tempo*

mf *f*

p *f*

Example 1.11 (Continued)

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is for a character named 'Magda'. The score is divided into two systems. The first system shows the vocal line with the lyrics 'ref - uge. To this we've come, to' and the piano accompaniment with markings 'poco accel.' and 'a tempo'. The second system shows the vocal line with the lyrics 'this we've come; and you, you, too, shall weep.' and the piano accompaniment with markings 'rit.' and 'ff a tempo'. The piano accompaniment features a complex harmonic structure with many chords and a steady rhythmic pattern.

Beginning in C minor, the second half of the aria is less stable. Magda asks the secretary agitatedly:

If to them, not to God, we now must pray,
tell me, Secretary, tell me,
who are these men?³²²

As she pleads with the Secretary, begging “tell me,” Magda arpeggiates through an octave, quickly descending and then ascending, demonstrating her increasing distress (Example 1.12).

³²² Ibid., 41.

Example 1.12

Second half of “To this we’ve come”

The image shows a musical score for the second half of the aria "To this we've come". It consists of three systems, each with a vocal line for Magda and a piano accompaniment. The first system starts with the tempo marking "a tempo" and the lyrics "If to men, not to God, we now must pray, tell me, Sec - re - ta - ry,". The piano part includes markings for "r.h." (right hand) and "l.h." (left hand). The second system continues with the lyrics "tell me, who are these men? If to them, not to God, we now must pray,". The third system concludes with the lyrics "tell me, Sec - re - ta - ry, tell me." The score is written in a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature.

At the end of the aria, Magda, “with almost a touch of madness in her voice,” questions the reality of the entire situation:

Have you ever seen the Consul?
Does he speak, does he breathe?
Have you ever spoken to him?³²³

At this, the Secretary appears to relent, and she tells Magda that “of course” she may see the Consul; “of course” this requires an appointment, and thus, yet another form with Magda’s

³²³ Ibid., 41.

signature.³²⁴ But Magda has had it with forms. According to Menotti's stage directions, she "snatches the paper from [the Secretary's] hand," exclaiming "Papers!" on a frantic, descending half step.³²⁵ She asks in desperation: "What shall I tell you to make you understand?"³²⁶ As if taking a deep breath, she tries to explain her situation again, her explanation centering around a series of rising minor thirds (Example 1.13).

Example 1.13

"Papers! Papers! Papers!"

Presto agitato

Magda
Pa - pers! Pa - pers! Pa - pers! But

Magda
don't you un - der - stand? What shall I tell you to make you un - der - stand?

Andante mosso

Magda
My child is dead... John's moth-er is dy-ing...

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system, titled 'Presto agitato', shows a vocal line for Magda with lyrics 'Pa - pers! Pa - pers! Pa - pers! But' and a piano accompaniment with a descending half-step melodic line. The second system shows a vocal line with lyrics 'don't you un - der - stand? What shall I tell you to make you un - der - stand?' and a piano accompaniment with a descending half-step melodic line. The third system, titled 'Andante mosso', shows a vocal line with lyrics 'My child is dead... John's moth-er is dy-ing...' and a piano accompaniment with a rising minor third melodic line.

³²⁴ Ibid., 41.

³²⁵ Ibid., 42.

³²⁶ Ibid., 42.

Then she launches into a crazed monologue, reciting her bureaucratic identity, her voice drifting higher and higher:

What is your name? Magda Sorel.
Age? Thirty-three.
Color of eyes? Color of hair?
Single or married? Religion and race?
Place of birth? Father's name? Mother's name?³²⁷

“Papers!” she exclaims again, repeating the frantic descending half-step motive, this time a tri-tone higher than before. Menotti’s stage directions indicate that “tearing the paper she holds in her hand, Magda rushes to the desk, takes up a great stack of papers from there, and begins to hurl them about the room.”³²⁸ Menotti builds tension by gradually speeding up the pace of Magda’s desperate exclamation. Initially, the “Papers” motive occurs once per measure, followed by three beats of rest. Then, the motive occurs twice per measure, separated by just one beat of rest, and finally, Menotti eliminates the pauses altogether (Example 1.14).

³²⁷ Ibid., 42.

³²⁸ Ibid., 42.

Example 1.14

“Papers! Papers! Papers!” Continued

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a vocal line for Magda and a piano accompaniment. The first system is in 4/4 time, with the vocal line starting on a whole note 'Pa - pers!' followed by a half rest, then another whole note 'Pa - pers!' followed by a half rest. The piano accompaniment is marked *ff* and features a complex, rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a more steady bass line in the left hand. The second system continues in 4/4 time, with the vocal line singing 'Pa - pers,' followed by a half rest, then 'pa - pers,' followed by a half rest, and finally 'pa - pers,' followed by a half rest. The piano accompaniment continues with similar rhythmic patterns. The third system changes to 3/4 time, with the vocal line singing 'pa - pers!' followed by a half rest, then 'Pa - pers,' followed by a half rest, and finally 'pa - pers, pa - pers!' followed by a half rest. The piano accompaniment also changes to 3/4 time and includes a *rit.* marking towards the end of the system.

Magda then launches into the final segment of the mad scene, as she commands the secretary:

Look at my eyes, they are afraid to sleep.
Look at my hands, at these old woman's hands.³²⁹

She begins a second iteration of her bureaucratic monologue. This time, however, she interrupts herself, demonstrating both the hopelessness of her situation and her increasing mental instability:

What is your name? Magda Sorel.
Age? Thirty-three.
What will your papers do?
They cannot stop the clock.
They are too thin an armor against a bullet.

³²⁹ Ibid., 42.

What is your name? Magda Sorel.
 Age? Thirty-three.
 What does that matter?
 All that matter is that the time is late,
 that I'm afraid and I need your help.³³⁰

“What is your name?” she asks again and again, her voice trailing off on a rasping D4 (Example 1.15). Seemingly pulling herself back together, she sings, according to Menotti’s stage directions “with great dignity and simplicity” between sparse orchestral interjections:

This is my answer:
 My name is woman.
 Age: still young.
 Color of hair: gray.
 Color of eyes: the color of tears.³³¹

Example 1.15

“What is your name?”

The musical score for Example 1.15 consists of two systems. The first system is for the vocal line (Magda) and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 12/8 time and begins with the lyrics "What is your name? What is your name?". The piano accompaniment is in 12/8 time and features a bass line with chords. The second system is for the vocal line (Magda) and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and begins with the lyrics "is wo-man. Age: Still young.". The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time and features a bass line with chords. The tempo marking "Meno mosso" is placed above the first system, and the dynamic marking "pp" is placed below the second system.

³³⁰ Ibid., 42.

³³¹ Ibid., 42.

Magda maintains her new-found composure until she gets to her “Occupation,” which she describes as “waiting.” As she repeats the word “waiting,” marked “allegro agitato,” her voice creeps higher and higher and the words tumble out closer and closer together.³³² Suddenly, Magda bursts out, hopefully and triumphantly, in coloratura style:

Oh, the day will come, I know,
when our hearts aflame
will burn your papers chains!
Warn the Consul, Secretary, warn him.
That day neither ink nor seal
shall cage our souls.
That day will come!³³³

This emotionally charged outpouring in E-flat major, its punch delivered not only through the words and vocal line but also through Menotti’s full and lush Hollywoodesque orchestration, is the climax of the opera (Example 1.16). This was the moment that as critics reported in and after 1950, routinely “brought down the house.”³³⁴ As Catherine Clément would likely point out, this emotional outpouring is somewhat dangerous:

On the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing. The emotion is never more poignant than at the moment when the voice is lifted to die. Look at these heroines. With their voices they flap their wings, their arms writhe, and then there they are, dead, on the ground.³³⁵

In fact, with this aria, Magda manages to move even the Secretary, for after this, she is granted access to the Consul. Yet her struggle proves futile because the Secret Police Agent, from whom Magda and her husband are trying to flee, is in collusion with the Consul. She watches him exit

³³² This is a reinterpretation of the “papers” motive, also a descending half step.

³³³ Menotti, *The Consul, Libretto*, 43.

³³⁴ See Fox, “Patricia Neway, Operatic Soprano Who Won a Tony, Dies at 92.”

³³⁵ Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, 5.

the Consul's office and realizes that there is simply no hope. Later, Magda does the unthinkable: she commits a gruesome suicide by gas so that her husband has no reason to return.³³⁶

Example 1.16

“The day will come”

ff **Largamente**

Magda Oh! the day will come, I know, when our

ff *colla voce*

Magda hearts a flame will burn your pa-per chains. Warn the

Magda Con - sul, Sec-re-tar - y, warn him. That day nei-ther ink nor

Magda seal shall cage our souls. That day will come, that

³³⁶ As Menotti's stage directions indicate: "[Magda] carries a chair over to the stove and sits down. After a moment of hesitation she opens the gas jets of the stove. Taking the Mother's shawl from the back of the chair, she draws it over her head and bends over the open jets of the stove. Slowly the light fades from the room, leaving only a strange, murky glow around the stove." See Menotti, *The Consul*, Libretto, 52. Composer and music critic Virgil Thomson described Magda's "fifteen-minute suicide by gas" as "the most striking and original musico-dramatic effect in the whole spectacle." See "Pathos and the Macabre," *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 March 1950.

Example 1.16 (Continued)

Magda

day will come!

tutta forza

The Consul's Reputation

With *The Consul*, Menotti managed to achieve something remarkable during his lifetime: nation-wide popularity as a composer of modern American opera. Interestingly, that popularity has not exactly faded. Regular productions of Menotti's shorter works, particularly *The Old Maid and the Thief*, *The Medium*, *The Telephone*, and *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, continue to occur in colleges and conservatories throughout the country. In fact, as of 2009, the service Opera America estimated that *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was the most performed American opera in the United States and Canada, surpassing even *Porgy and Bess*.³³⁷ Yet in terms of the scholarly record, both *The Consul's* and Menotti's significance have been grossly overlooked. I would speculate that Menotti's

³³⁷ See Opera America's North American Works Directory: <http://www.operaamerica.org/Applications/nawd/index.aspx> (accessed 1 May 2017). Musicologist Jennifer Barnes has examined the significance of *Amahl*, noting that when the television opera was first broadcast on NBC on December 24, 1951, the "response . . . was overwhelming," as "enthusiastic listeners jammed the company's switchboard for hours after the performance." See *Television Opera*, 28. Barnes argues, moreover, that "during the 1950s, *Amahl* created a brief phenomenon, an opera that corporations competed to sponsor, not as a charitable or benevolent gesture, but because *Amahl* commanded such large audiences" (p. 19).

near erasure from the scholarly record may be explained by the composer's steep and fast compositional decline during the latter half of the 1950s and by the way in which that decline thwarts the standard of stylistic evolution and transcendence so beloved among musicologists.

As Richard Taruskin writes, "Menotti's was a strangely lopsided career . . . with amazing early successes followed by near oblivion."³³⁸ Arriving in Philadelphia in 1928 at the age of eighteen, Menotti continued his music studies, which he had begun in Milan, at the Curtis Institute of Music.³³⁹ In 1937, Curtis gave the premiere of Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball* at the Philadelphia Academy of Music; one year later, the Met mounted seven acclaimed performances of the one-act opera buffa.³⁴⁰ In 1939, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) commissioned Menotti to write a radio opera. The result, a one-act comedy similar to *Amelia*, entitled *The Old Maid and the Thief*, was broadcast on 22 April 1939. It was quickly picked up by college and community opera groups, and somewhat later, by professional companies.³⁴¹ Menotti's next major success came in 1946, when Columbia University premiered his eerie melodrama *The Medium*.³⁴²

³³⁸ See Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Late Twentieth Century, Revised Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 2010), 226.

³³⁹ At Curtis, Menotti studied composition with the Italian composer Rosario Scalero (1870-1954). In addition to Menotti, Scalero's students included Marc Blitzstein, Samuel Barber, Nino Rota, Hugo Weisgall, Lukas Foss, Ned Rorem, Rolf Scheurer, and George Walker. See "Composition at Curtis," Curtis Library, Online Archival Exhibit, 15 April 2014, <http://library.curtis.edu/?portfolio=composition-at-curtis> (accessed 1 May 2017).

³⁴⁰ Menotti wrote the libretto for *Amelia Goes to the Ball* in Italian, translating it into English prior to the Curtis premiere. In 1938, the original *Amelia al ballo* was presented in San Remo. After *Amelia*, Menotti wrote his libretti in English.

³⁴¹ In 1948, the NYCO presented the first staged production of *The Old Maid and the Thief* in New York City.

³⁴² See The Columbia Theater Associates of Columbia University in co-operation with The Columbia University Department of Music present THE MEDIUM, a new Chamber Opera, Text and Music by Gian-Carlo Menotti, "Columbia University -Columbia Theater Associates - Programs (1945-1950)," Box 1, Columbia Theater Associates, 1893-1958, Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Luening served as musical director, Claramae Turner starred as Madame Flora, the phony psychic, and per his request, Menotti himself directed the staging. Notably, Turner went on to play Nettie Fowler in the 1956 film adaptation of Rogers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*.

One year after the Columbia premiere, *The Medium* appeared on the Ballet Society's one-act opera season, sponsored by Lincoln Kirstein; several months later, it opened on Broadway.³⁴³ In both cases, *The Medium* was paired with a comic curtain raiser entitled *The Telephone*, which Menotti had composed because Kirstein desired a double bill.³⁴⁴ *The Medium* and *The Telephone*'s impressive six-month run at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, coupled with continual productions of *Amelia Goes to the Ball* and *The Old Maid and the Thief*, seemed to anoint Menotti as something of the "American of choice" in the opera world, as Julius Rudel recalled in his memoir.³⁴⁵ With *The Consul*, Menotti simply sealed the deal, demonstrating that he could also write a full-length tragic opera that would appeal to Americans.

In October 1951, approximately one year after *The Consul* had closed on Broadway, the magazine *Opera News* suggested "Menotti mania" as "a possible slogan for current operatic taste in the United States," estimating that at least 357 performances of operas by Menotti had taken place throughout the year.³⁴⁶ Citing the University of Denver's recent production of *The Consul*, the magazine declared that the opera was "already bearing fruit from the repercussions of its success on Broadway and its numerous European engagements."³⁴⁷ Indeed, by this time, *The Consul* had made

³⁴³ *The Medium* and *The Telephone* opened together on 18 February 1947, at the Heckscher Theatre in New York during the Ballet Society's one-act opera season. The double bill then played at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre from 1 May 1947 to 1 November 1947, totaling 212 performances. See *The Telephone/The Medium*, Ethel Barrymore Theatre, 5/01/1947-11/01/1947, Internet Broadway Database (IBDB), accessed 1 May 2017. *The Medium* and *The Telephone* were revived on Broadway in 1950, this time playing at the Arena Theatre (later renamed the Edison Theatre and now a ballroom at the Hotel Edison). *The Medium* and *The Telephone* ran for 110 performances in 1950. See *The Telephone/The Medium*, Arena Theatre, 7/19/2015-10/14/1950, IBDB, <http://www.ibdb.com/Production/View/2151> (accessed 1 May 2017).

³⁴⁴ See Wlaschin, *Gian Carlo Menotti on Screen*, 123.

³⁴⁵ Rudel and Paller, *First and Lasting Impressions*, 71.

³⁴⁶ "Menotti Mania," *Opera News*, 29 October 1951, p. 18-19.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

its way to Milan, London, Zürich, Berlin, and Vienna.³⁴⁸ In 1952, the NYCO added *The Consul* to its repertoire, continuing to stage the opera regularly during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.³⁴⁹ The NYCO featured *The Consul* on the 1959 and 1960 all-American opera seasons sponsored by the Ford Foundation.³⁵⁰ Also in 1960, *The Consul* made the transition into another, more widely accessible arena, this time moving from stage to screen in a well-received film for television, directed by Jean Dalrymple and starring Neway.³⁵¹

Yet after *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951), Menotti struggled to write another hit. He did continue to compose operas, however, into the 1990s.³⁵² Menotti's "strangely lopsided career," to

³⁴⁸ See Hixon, *Gian Carlo Menotti*, 6.

³⁴⁹ See "Annals of the New York City Opera" in Martin L. Sokol, *The New York City Opera: An American Adventure* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981). Also in 1952, the *Musical Courier* reported on productions at the University of Southern California and the Eastman School of Music, as well as in Cleveland, Ohio and Portland, Oregon, demonstrating the opera's appeal across the United States as well as in New York. See C. Sharpless Hickman, "West Coast Fetes Staging of Consul," *Musical Courier*, 1 January 1952, p. 26; "Cleveland Stages Menotti's Consul," *Musical Courier*, 1 March 1952, p. 13; "The Consul Staged in Portland," *Musical Courier*, 1 May 1952, p. 7; Norman Nairn, "Eastman School Holds Festival," *Musical Courier*, June, 1952, p. 16.

³⁵⁰ See Tedrin Blair Lindsay, "The Coming of Age of American Opera: New York City Opera and the Ford Foundation, 1958-1960," PhD Dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2009. *The Consul* was not included in the first all-American opera season (Spring 1958); it was included in both the second and third all-American seasons (Spring 1959 and Spring 1960). According to Lindsay, Rudel "presented four operas from the three all-American seasons aggressively over multiple seasons, so that they attained real repertoire status in the company: *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (22 performances), *Street Scene* (18 performances), *The Consul* (15 performances), and *Susannah* (12 performances)" (p. 483).

³⁵¹ In 2004, the Estate of Jean Dalrymple issued a DVD of the televised version, relying on archival video material from the collections of The Library of Congress. See Menotti, *The Consul: A Musical Drama in Three Acts* (Pleasantville, NY: Video Artists International DVD 4266, 1960, 2004). Dalrymple worked as a producer for the Light Opera Company, affiliated, like the NYCO, with the City Center. She later became the executive producer for the International Telemeter Company, the pay division of Paramount Pictures. See John P. Shanley, "Miss Dalrymple Turns to Toll Television," *New York Times*, 10 April 1960; Jack Gould, "Triumph on Pay-TV," *New York Times*, 19 March 1961. For more about Jean Dalrymple, see her memoir: *From the Last Row* (Clifton, New Jersey: James T. White & Company, 1975).

³⁵² Menotti also wrote a number of plays and librettos. For example, he supplied the libretto for Samuel Barber's opera *Vanessa*, which enjoyed a successful premiere at the Met in 1958. Barber was Menotti's life partner. Musicologist Nadine Hubbs briefly discusses Barber and Menotti's relationship in her study of gay American composers. See *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). In addition to *Vanessa*, Menotti supplied the libretto for Barber's *A Hand of Bridge* (1960) and Lukas Foss's *Introductions and Goodbyes* (1961). Menotti also helped to revise the libretto for Barber's *Antony and*

return to Taruskin's characterization, may have been due to the fact that he increasingly spread himself too thin, such that his later musical compositions did not measure up to the expectations he had previously established. For instance, when Menotti founded the Festival dei Due Mondi (Festival of Two Worlds) in Spoleto, Italy, in 1958, his time for composition became scarce.³⁵³

According to Gruen, "Menotti the composer was suddenly transformed into Menotti the organizer, the fund-raiser, the administrator, the talent scout, the secretary, the dealer in minutiae, the father-confessor, and the politician."³⁵⁴ Several of Menotti's colleagues have suggested that

Menotti's artistic work began to suffer when he took on administration of the Festival. On 6

January 1959, Otto Luening wrote to his colleague Jack Beeson:

I think that John-Carlo is taking on too much stuff and running much too close to the waterline or deadline, if you like. Perhaps in his next opera he will also hire somebody to compose it for him. I saw part of the work [*Maria Golovin*] at a rehearsal in Rome and believe me it was thin. Too bad. This gentleman does have a certain amount of talent, but I'm inclined to think that he did his best job when he wrote *The Medium*.³⁵⁵

Cleopatra, which Barber and Franco Zeffirelli had prepared together, after the opera received a rather lackluster premiere at the Met in 1966. For a discussion of Menotti and Barber's operatic collaborations, see Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). In 1970, Menotti's play *The Leper* premiered at Florida State University in Tallahassee.

³⁵³ According to Wlaschin, Menotti founded the Spoleto Festival in 1958 "specifically for the small hill town of Spoleto, north of Rome." In 1977, Menotti expanded the operation, founding a "companion Spoleto festival" in Charleston, South Carolina. As Wlaschin writes, both festivals "take place annually in June and July and revolve around new operas, plays, ballets and other performing arts productions." See *Gian Carlo Menotti on Screen*, 143. Galliano Ciliberti and Paolo Gallarati assert that conductor Thomas Schippers was "an important catalyst of the festival." See Galliano Ciliberti and Paolo Gallarati, "Spoleto," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press (accessed 1 May 2017), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/26448>.

³⁵⁴ Gruen, *Menotti*, 129.

³⁵⁵ Carbon Copy of Letter, Otto Luening to Jack Beeson, 6 January 1959, Folder 9, Box 1, Otto Luening Papers, JPB 94-07, Music Division, New York Public Library. With the remark, "Perhaps in his next opera he will also hire somebody to compose it for him," Luening was referring to the fact that Menotti had apparently hired his students Stanley Hollinsworth and Lee Hoiby to help him with *Maria Golovin*, perhaps as orchestrators.

Luening's words demonstrate how by 1959, Menotti's days as the "American of choice in the opera world" were numbered.³⁵⁶

As the century wore on, Menotti earned the reputation of a disorganized and even hack composer. In her 1987 autobiography, soprano Beverly Sills recalled her experience starring in the premiere of *La Loca* at the San Diego Opera in 1979. Sills noted that Menotti's musical-dramatization of the life of Juana, the mad, tragic sixteenth-century queen of Spain, "wasn't finished when we started rehearsing it," and it "wasn't finished when we *performed* it."³⁵⁷ In fact, Sills claimed that she had to construct much of the opera's mad scene herself, labeling Menotti's original text "just plain silly":

Juana had been through such a long ordeal, and Gian-Carlo had written words for her like "Catch it, catch it."

I asked him, "Catch *what*? What is Juana trying to catch?"

Menotti said, "Well, she imagines things. Words tumble from her mouth."
"Not *those* words, Gian-Carlo," I told him. "I wouldn't sing them even if there *were* music for them. They're ridiculous."³⁵⁸

Sills's reflection on *La Loca*'s premiere indicates just how damaged Menotti's reputation was by the final decades of the twentieth century.³⁵⁹

Menotti's career trajectory thus departs considerably from the heroic, Beethovenian model so appealing to musicologists. Instead of transcendence, Menotti's late works exhibit an almost

³⁵⁶ Rudel and Paller, *First and Lasting Impressions*, 71.

³⁵⁷ Beverly Sills and Lawrence Linderman, *Beverly: An Autobiography* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), 287.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 288-289.

³⁵⁹ Additionally, composer Carlisle Floyd recalled to me that he attended the premiere of *La Loca*, and found the atmosphere backstage to be exceedingly tense and unpleasant. Carlisle Floyd, interview with the author, Tallahassee, Florida, 19 May 2015.

alarming level of deterioration. Our music histories continue to favor narratives inherited from the nineteenth century that emphasize progress, innovation, and transcendence over the course of an artist's life and career.³⁶⁰ As musicologist Karen Painter explains, historians tend to “prize artistic production that seems to sum up the accumulated experience of life in a mature aesthetic vision.”³⁶¹ In this way, Menotti's decline may have facilitated musicologists' outright dismissal of his popularity during the 1940s and 1950s. A case in point is the musicologist Joseph Kerman.

In the final chapter of the first edition of his book *Opera as Drama*, published in 1956, Kerman excoriated Menotti, describing him as “an entirely trivial artist . . . mainly interesting on account of his highly successful exploitation of the bad old ways.”³⁶² Despite his later role as a proponent of the so-called “new” musicology, Kerman's assessment of Menotti reflects the values of the “old” musicology.³⁶³ Kerman admitted as much in the preface to the revised edition of *Opera*

³⁶⁰ This is perhaps most obvious in terms of scholars' fascination with Beethoven's late style. See Stephen C. Rumph, *Beethoven After Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); William Kinderman, “The Evolution of Beethoven's Late Style: Another ‘New Path’ After 1824?” *Beethoven Forum* 8, no. 1 (2000): 71-99. See also Scott Burnham, “Late Styles” in *Rethinking Schumann*, edited by Roe-Min Kok and Laura Tunbridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 411-430; Jeffery Kallberg, “Chopin's Last Style,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38, no. 2 (1985): 264-315; Susan Youens, *Schubert's Late Lieder: Beyond the Song-Cycles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁶¹ Karen Painter, “On Creativity and Lateness” in *Late Thoughts: Reflections on Artists and Composers at Work*, edited by Karen Painter and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 1. For another theory of artistic lateness, see Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Four Last Songs: Aging and Creativity in Verdi, Strauss, Messiaen, and Britten* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

³⁶² Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 264.

³⁶³ As David Fallows explains, “new musicology” became “something of a slogan in the late 1980s,” emerging from “the perception that musicology as a discipline had become too strongly based on sources, documentation, and newly discovered facts; that it lacked broader consideration of critical, aesthetic, psychological, perceptual, and sociological issues.” See David Fallows, “new musicology,” *The Oxford Companion to Music*, *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e4712> (accessed 1 May 2017). As Kerman described the “old” musicology in 1985: “In the popular mind – and in the minds of many academics – musicology is restricted not only in the subject matter it covers but also in its approach to that subject matter . . . Musicology is perceived as dealing essentially with the factual, the documentary, the verifiable, the analysable, the positivistic. Musicologists are respected for the facts they know about music. They are not admired for their insight into music as an aesthetic experience.” See *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge, MA:

as *Drama*, published in 1988, explaining how “the deletion of many on the spot judgments in the original *Opera as Drama*—judgments about composers, operas, scenes, and individual operatic numbers—can be seen as a further response to the climate of today’s criticism, which is so much more hospitable to interpretation than to evaluation.”³⁶⁴ In fact, Kerman deleted the entire final original chapter of *Opera as Drama* “so as to omit *inter alia* an unduly shrill attack on the operas of Gian-Carlo Menotti and a gratuitous wisecrack about Benjamin Britten.”³⁶⁵ Kerman justified his decision by noting that he had been “hoping for a long time to be able to remove these *péchés de jeunesse* from public view.”³⁶⁶ Menotti’s name is thus entirely absent from the revised edition of *Opera as Drama*.

Kerman’s solution to what might be termed the Menotti problem, however, is unsatisfactory. Simply omitting Menotti from the scholarly record in fact prevents “interpretation” of American operatic culture during the early Cold War. And yet, Kerman’s solution has exerted a powerful influence on contemporary opera scholarship. In 2012, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker discussed John Adams’s *Nixon in China* (1987), explaining that in this opera, Adams “went against the grain of post-1945 operatic fashion, which . . . overwhelmingly preferred remote, mythical or at least historical subjects.”³⁶⁷ If *The Consul* were factored into the equation,

Harvard University Press, 1985), 12. Other oft-cited proponents of the “new” musicology include Susan McClary, Rose Rosengard Subotnick, and Lawrence Kramer.

³⁶⁴ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama, New and Revised Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), x.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

³⁶⁷ See Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 544. Abbate and Parker’s discussion of *Nixon in China* is in line with Richard Taruskin’s thinking. In the *Oxford History of Western Music*, Taruskin referred to Adams’s output under the heading “A New Topicality.” See *The Oxford History of Western Music: Music in the Late Twentieth Century*, 516-517.

however, *Nixon in China* would have a significant forebear. Equally striking is the complete absence of Menotti from Abbate and Parker's relatively recent history of opera, which they dedicated to Kerman. Thus just as Menotti shunned the label opera (for its overtones), so, too, has operatic history shunned him. Defying both Menotti and operatic history, I am arguing for thorough examination of *The Consul* as an opera precisely because it steers us toward a better understanding of Kerman's initial assessment of the 1950s as "a time fascinated by opera and saddled with Menotti"; *The Consul* demonstrates how opera's long history involving politics and nationalism came to bear quite powerfully in the United States.³⁶⁸ Thus to continue to ignore Menotti's career and one of his most influential operas is to continue to gloss over the way in which American opera participated in and benefitted from the war and propaganda machine during the early Cold War era.

Later Interpretations of *The Consul*

In 1971, Luigi Nono withdrew his opera *Intolleranza* (1960) from the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino because *The Consul* was also being staged during the festival. In a letter published in *L'Unita*, Italy's official communist newspaper, Nono termed *The Consul* "a squalid product of the cold war and of anti-Sovietism."³⁶⁹ Nono was particularly offended by *The Consul's* presence at the 1971 Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, because that year the festival was to be dedicated to La Resistenza (the resistance movement during World War II).

³⁶⁸ Kerman, *Opera as Drama, First Edition*, 266-267. Opera's historic political connections are perhaps best exemplified by the operas of Jean-Baptiste Lully, composer for Louis XIV. See Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV & the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Robert M. Isherwood, *Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

³⁶⁹ See "Perchè Nono rifiuta di partecipare al Maggio fiorentino," *L'Unita*, 12 November 1971, p. 3. "Il console, che è squallido prodotto della guerra fredda e dell'anti sovietismo."

Nono's accusation and the commotion that ensued centered on *The Consul's* reputation as a piece of propaganda for the American side of the Cold War.³⁷⁰ On 16 December 1971, music critic Rubens Tedeschi summarized the controversy in *L'Unita* in an article entitled "Origins and Meanings of a Polemic: The Menotti Case."³⁷¹ Tedeschi presented the two sides of the polemic as follows: one side viewed *The Consul* as an anti-communist, American opera.³⁷² The other side, its main proponents being Menotti, Roman Vlad (artistic director of the Teatro Comunale di Firenze), and Fedele D'Amico (an Italian musicologist and critic), suggested that *The Consul* was actually an opera that took a stance against the United States.

Tedeschi asserted that the duplicitous nature of Menotti's libretto was what allowed both sides of the debate to simmer. He argued that because *The Consul* took place in an unidentified European country at an unidentified time, its underlying message was inherently ambiguous. Tedeschi compared Menotti's plot to a double-faced winter coat, explaining that if a director set *The Consul* during World War II in a country dominated by Nazism, the opera would appear to advance one message. But if *The Consul* was set after the war in a communist country, its message would be entirely different. Noting that *The Consul* appeared in 1950 in the red-hot environment of the Korean War, Tedeschi explained how many viewers (as I have demonstrated throughout this

³⁷⁰ See Giovanna Kessler, "Intolerant mit 'Intolleranza,'" *Opernwelt*, (February 1972): 12-13; Stelios Galatopoulos, "Intolerant Nono," *Music and Musicians* 20 (February 1972): 10; "Spoleto: Political Storm in a Tea-Cup," *Opera* 23 (March 1972): 217.

³⁷¹ See Rubens Tedeschi, "Origini e Significato di una Polemica: Il Caso Menotti," *L'Unita*, 16 Dicembre 1971, p. 11. Menotti's response to Nono's initial attack appeared in *L'Unita* below Tedeschi's invective. Menotti accused Nono and his followers of making false, defamatory statements. See "Una lettera del musicista."

³⁷² Ibid. Tedeschi explained that after Nono withdrew *Intolleranza* in protest, musicologist Luigi Pestalozza had taken Nono's side, criticizing Roman Vlad, artistic director of the Teatro Comunale di Firenze, for promoting *The Consul*. Pestalozza stated that Menotti's opera was a product of anti-communism, and that it had no right to be performed on a festival honoring the Resistance. Tedeschi noted that fifteen Italian intellectuals, mainly musicians and musicologists, had reiterated Nono and Pestalozza's assertion that *The Consul* was an opera about the Cold War.

chapter) saw the opera as an episode of life behind the Iron Curtain. Continuing with clever analogies, Tedeschi likened Menotti's plot to an omelet that one could flip to either side, according to one's fancy.³⁷³

Tedeschi's complaints regarding the malleability of *The Consul's* plot are relevant to a discussion of the opera in American culture in the twenty-first century, given that *The Consul* may be making something of a comeback. In February 2014, the Seattle Opera produced *The Consul*, and *Seattle Times* critic Melinda Bargreen advertised the work as "probably the most popular opera you've never seen."³⁷⁴ She explained:

This opera was more popular than "Porgy and Bess" in its day. Then "The Consul" more or less sank from view, despite the fact that its themes of political oppression, soulless bureaucracy, and the quest for freedom are as timely today as at the opera's premiere.³⁷⁵

In May 2015, the Florida Grand Opera (FGO) borrowed the Seattle Opera production, offering *The Consul* to audiences in Miami, and bringing to the fore its "timely" themes. The FGO partnered with the School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University (FIU), the Frost School of Music at the University of Miami, Wolfsonian-FIU, and the National Endowment for the Arts, sponsoring a number of free "Community Conversations" designed to promote *The Consul* and to demonstrate its relevance to the immigrant experience in Miami.³⁷⁶ A

³⁷³ Tedeschi also argued that *The Consul* was mere entertainment for a bourgeois audience. Ultimately, it could not be said to represent the Resistance, because the Resistance was a movement of progress against the "obtuse conservatism" that Menotti actually supported.

³⁷⁴ Melinda Bargreen, "Seattle Opera Revives a Gripping, Polished 'Consul,'" *Seattle Times*, 24 February 2014, <http://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/seattle-opera-revives-a-gripping-polished-lsquoconsulrsquo/> (accessed 1 May 2017).

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ See Florida Grand Opera, "In Endless Waiting Rooms": Part of the Community Conversations Series, <http://tickets.fgo.org/Tickets/EventDetails.aspx?id=1342> (accessed 1 May 2017). On immigration to Miami, see Melanie Shell-Weiss, *Coming to Miami: A Social History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009).

panel entitled “In endless waiting rooms: Our Stories” took place on 29 March 2015, a little over a month before *The Consul*’s opening.³⁷⁷ In this incarnation, *The Consul* stretched out an arm to displaced people, offering solace. According to an advertisement in FIU News:

The speakers, including a Holocaust survivor, will offer personal reflections on the experience of leaving home and immigrating to a strange, new land. Some fled wars, genocide or political repression and moved to Miami where they have embraced the challenges and hopes found in the city’s landscape. Punctuated by music from the Florida Grand Opera’s upcoming production of Gian Carlo Menotti’s *The Consul*, this program will take the audience on a journey from Europe to Cuba to Haiti and to the Middle East.³⁷⁸

It would seem that the FGO’s promotions made an impact. When Steve Gladstone reviewed the production, he enthused:

And who among us in the south Florida audience is not an immigrant, refugee or a descendant of same? Whose story does not contain a chapter from Europe, Cuba, Latin America or Haiti? Or maybe the connection is a loved one embroiled in the conflict du jour in Ukraine, Syria and Yemen. Or a story of an émigré from Libya as they arrive on the shores of Europe, or not.³⁷⁹

Thus recent revivals of *The Consul* have taken advantage of the opera’s malleability, using *The Consul* to comment on the present in a way which surely would have made Tedeschi cringe.

My purpose here is not to side with Tedeschi, or to promote the Seattle Opera production or the Florida Grand Opera production. I seek instead to point out that the legacy of the Cold War continues to play out in subsequent productions and discussions of *The Consul*. Even in the second decade of the twenty-first century, many international migration patterns date back to the

³⁷⁷ “In endless waiting rooms” refers to the quintet at the end of Act I in *The Consul*.

³⁷⁸ See FIU News, “Community Members to Share Their Immigration Stories,” posted by Evelyn Perez on 19 March 2015, <https://news.fiu.edu/2015/03/community-members-to-share-their-immigration-stories/86386> (accessed 1 May 2017).

³⁷⁹ Steve Gladstone, FGO’s Consul Superb Theatrical Opera: Spectacular Performance Spot On, *miamiartzine*, 13 May 2015, http://www.miamiartzine.com/Features.php?op=Article_The+Consul+review (accessed 1 May 2017).

aftermath of World War II and to the way in which the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain went about re-defining Europe's borders and establishing spheres of influence all over the globe.³⁸⁰ Thus every time we return to *The Consul*, we return to the Cold War. Every time we return to *The Consul*, moreover, we return to the sticky nature of music and politics, particularly in combination.

³⁸⁰ See Serhii Plokhy, *Yalta: The Price of Peace* (New York: Viking, 2010). See also Leonard Dinnerstein and Davis M. Reimers, *The World Comes to America: Immigration to the United States Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

CHAPTER 2

Lizzie Borden, A Family Portrait: Taking an Axe to Patriarchal Oppression in the United States?

Housed by the New York Public Library, the papers of author and academic Richard Plant (1910-1998) include a shadow box dedicated to two Lizzie Borden: Lizzie Borden, the woman, and *Lizzie Borden*, the 1965 opera with music by Jack Beeson and a libretto by Kenward Elmslie, based on a scenario by Plant.³⁸¹ Across the top of the box blares a headline from an article in the *New York Times*, dated 21 March 1965, four days before the New York City Opera (NYCO) premiered *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait*.³⁸² The headline reads: “The Lizzie Borden Case.” Lizzie’s surname, however, is obscured by the head of a small plastic skeleton, its body splayed across the rest of the display, pelvis draping over a small hatchet dripping with fake blood. The shadow box also contains newspaper clippings of the faces of two women: Lizzie Andrew Borden (1860-1927), the presumed killer, and Brenda Lewis (b. 1921), the mezzo-soprano who brought her back to life to kill again. At the bottom of the display, a signature reads: ’65 JRL ’80. While there are many things about this mysterious and rather creepy memento that remain unknown, what the shadow box offers is a glimpse into one writer’s obsession with Lizzie Borden, America’s most infamous axe-murderess. With this chapter, I seek to more fully illuminate Plant’s attachment to this particular American historical figure and cultural icon.

³⁸¹ See Lizzie Borden Shadowbox, Box 38, Richard Plant Papers (RPP), Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

³⁸² For the full article, see Theodore Strongin, “The Lizzie Borden Case,” *New York Times*, 21 March 1965.

Lizzie Andrew Borden became notorious on 4 August 1892, the day someone murdered her father and stepmother in their home in Fall River, Massachusetts. It was a gruesome scene, an axe or hatchet the apparent murder weapon. Thirty-two-year-old Lizzie later testified that she discovered her father slumped across the sofa in the living room. He appeared to have suffered ten or eleven hatchet blows, one of which actually sliced his left eyeball cleanly in half. As the story goes, Lizzie cried out for help, and her stepmother, Abby Durfee Borden, was later found lying facedown on the floor in one of the upstairs bedrooms.³⁸³ She appeared to have suffered nineteen direct blows to the back of her head.

Lizzie Borden was eventually arrested, tried, and acquitted of the crimes; in the court of public opinion, however, she has generally remained guilty. Since 1892, people have returned to the Borden murders, drawn to the sensational image of Lizzie as a hatchet-swinging murderess and in search of an explanation: What could possibly drive a *lady* to pick up a hatchet and wield it, first against her stepmother, and then her father, striking each one not just once but over and over again? Lizzie Borden has been the subject of much scrutiny – in newspaper stories and exposes, books, plays, movies, a ballet, a children’s rhyme, and in 2014 and 2015, a Lifetime movie and television miniseries starring Christina Ricci.³⁸⁴ To this day, those in search of a thrill can even spend the night at the Lizzie Borden Bed & Breakfast Museum in Fall River, sleeping in one of the rooms where the murders took place.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ For a concise and impartial retelling of Borden murders, see Karen Elizabeth Chaney, *New England Remembers Lizzie Borden*, Robert J. Allison, Series Editor (Beverly, Massachusetts: Commonwealth Editions, 2006).

³⁸⁴ Lifetime aired the movie *Lizzie Borden Took an Ax* in 2014. The next year, they continued the story in a miniseries entitled *The Lizzie Borden Chronicles*, set in the days following Lizzie’s acquittal. Both the movie and the miniseries starred Christina Ricci.

³⁸⁵ See Lizzie Borden Bed & Breakfast Museum, <https://lizzie-borden.com/> (accessed 2 May 2017).

Lizzie Borden is most often approached as an American icon, yet during the 1940s, she captured the attention of gay German-Jewish émigré Richard Plant, a writer who was soon-to-become professor of German Language and Literature at the City College of New York. Plant was someone who struggled to come to terms with World War II and the Holocaust. In fact, as he grappled with his sense of responsibility for his own parents' deaths, Plant grew to identify with Lizzie and her presumed guilt. In 1954, Plant approached Jack Beeson (1921-2010), a composer teaching at Columbia University, and the pair began to make plans for an opera about Lizzie Borden. Beeson later recalled that in crafting the operatic Lizzie, he and Plant sought to explain “why” Lizzie had to murder her father and stepmother, for as he and Plant agreed, there was “no story at all if one doesn't assume she did do it.”³⁸⁶ Beeson and Plant worked together until April 1961, when Plant, citing health problems, stepped aside, leaving Beeson to complete the opera with another librettist. Beeson turned to Kenward Elmslie, with whom he had collaborated previously. On 25 March 1965, the NYCO finally premiered *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait*. The opera was also produced for television, and it was first telecast in January of 1967.³⁸⁷ In both cases, Brenda Lewis, a soprano known on Broadway and in the opera house, starred in the title role.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Jack Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” *Opera Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1986): 16.

³⁸⁷ The 1967 telecast is now available on DVD. See *Lizzie Borden*, DVD, directed by Kirk Browning (1967; Pleasantville, NY: Video Artists International DVD 4365, 2013).

³⁸⁸ Born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Brenda Lewis attended Penn State University and the Curtis Institute of Music. As Bonnie Elizabeth Fleming points out, she made her multi-faceted career on Broadway, in light opera, on the radio and on television, and at the New York City Opera and the Metropolitan Opera. Notably, she sang the title role in Marc Blitzstein's *Regina* on Broadway in 1949. During the 1960s, she began working as a producer and stage director for the New Haven Opera Company. In 1973, became Professor of Voice and Opera at the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford. See Bonnie Elizabeth Fleming, “Lewis, Brenda,” *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2285221> (accessed 2 May 2017).

In this chapter, I reconstruct the tumultuous paths that led to *Lizzie's* premiere, using previously untouched archival materials from Plant's personal papers at the New York Public Library and Beeson's personal papers at Columbia University. These collections include correspondence as well as outlines and drafts of the libretto and score. Beeson's papers are the product of the composer's own careful presentation and preservation of his life and work. Most notably, Beeson compiled three *Lizzie Borden* notebooks, which as he put it, "represent the results of an attempt to put together various scratch-sheets, interim versions, "final" versions and correspondence relating to the writing of the libretto of *Lizzie Borden*."³⁸⁹ Shortly after *Lizzie's* premiere, he drafted "The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*," drawing heavily on materials that he had collected for his notebooks. In 1986, Beeson finally published "The Autobiography" in the journal *The Opera Quarterly*.³⁹⁰

Because he did not carefully curate his own papers, did not publish an account of his work on *Lizzie Borden*, and, most importantly, did not complete the project, Plant's contributions to the opera have been routinely overlooked. His name has been placed in small print or omitted entirely from advertisements and reviews of the opera, a situation that often caused Plant considerable distress.³⁹¹ In fact, Plant suspected that someone, possibly Elmslie, was trying to cheat him by

³⁸⁹ See *Lizzie Borden Notebook*, Vol. 1, 6 June 1965, Folder 1, Box 12, Jack Beeson Papers (JBP), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. Beeson prefaced this first notebook with a document explaining the notebook's contents. For the second and third notebooks, see Folders 2 and 3 in Box 12. Beeson also compiled six *Lizzie Borden* "scrapbooks," spanning the years 1965-2008. See Boxes 38 and 39.

³⁹⁰ See Beeson, "The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*," 15-42.

³⁹¹ In Plant's personal papers, there are copies of numerous letters that Plant sent out, seeking to ensure that his name was not placed in small print or omitted from promotional materials, as well as from the published score and recording of the opera. See Folder 22, Box 1, RPP.

intentionally downplaying his work on the libretto.³⁹² Throughout this chapter, I seek to bring Plant's contributions to the fore because it was indeed he who set *Lizzie Borden* on her course. Moreover, his personal and deeply psychological relationship with Lizzie illuminates how this opera connects to the histories and testimonies of the Holocaust that began to appear in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s.³⁹³

In addition to my examination of archival materials, I draw from interviews that I conducted with various performers involved in the 1965 premiere, as well as later productions. I interviewed Brenda Lewis and conductor Anton Coppola, both of whom participated in the premiere. I also spoke with Phyllis Pancella, who starred in the 1996 revival of *Lizzie* at the Glimmerglass Opera, repeated by the NYCO in 1999, again with Pancella as Lizzie. Finally, I interviewed Beeson's daughter Miranda, who recalled not only her father's work on the opera but also her own experience singing in the Children's Choir in the premiere. I am grateful to these interlocutors for their perspectives help to clarify *Lizzie's* significance within the realm of performance and lived experience.

I maintain that *Lizzie Borden's* genesis represents how Plant sought to come to terms with the Holocaust, while the opera's later composition and performance history speaks to the burgeoning of the modern feminist movement. Thus I argue that *Lizzie Borden* glides between two

³⁹² I have found no evidence to suggest that this was actually true. Plant, however, remained suspicious. For example, on 20 May 1966, he wrote to Beeson, asserting finally: "If I were a slightly bit paranoid [sic], I would suspect that there is some dirty play on the part of somebody.." See Letter, Plant to Beeson, 20 May 1966, Folder 22, Box 1, RPP.

³⁹³ See Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, translated by Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958). First published in Italian in 1947, *Se questo é un uomo* (If This is a Man) was published in English translation in 1959. See Ellie Wiesel, *Night*, foreword by Francois Mauriac, translated by Stella Rodway (New York: Hill and Want, 1960). *Night* is a chilling first-person account of Wiesel's experience in the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Published in France in 1958, *Night* was first published in the United States in 1960, the first of a trilogy chronicling Wiesel's path to recovery after surviving the Holocaust. *Dawn* was published in 1961 and *Day* was published in 1962.

spaces and struggles in time, one rooted in decidedly postwar anxieties and the other looking ahead to women's liberation.³⁹⁴ Indeed, the operatic Lizzie almost appears as a symbol of "women's lib" for, collectively, Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie constructed Lizzie to be a woman who literally hacks patriarchal oppression to death. As Brenda Lewis has attested, in the 1960s, one could not fail to see the contemporary relevance of Lizzie's struggle. Yet as I will demonstrate through musical and historical analysis, there are limits to Lizzie's liberation in the opera. These limits suggest that as a heroine, Lizzie represents not an uncomplicated celebration of women's liberation, but rather, the anxieties that accompanied the movement. Weaving Plant's history and perspective together with my feminist reading, I show how despite their physical escapes, patriarchal authority continues to haunt both Plant and his surrogate Lizzie.

Premiering fifteen years after *The Consul* opened on Broadway, *Lizzie Borden* also illuminates how the family continued to serve as a powerful political metaphor in the United States. To be sure, by 1965, the nuclear family was no longer idealized to the extent that it was regarded as a bulwark against communism, yet the family was still touted as a locus for American values, as it remains today. For many, the advent of modern feminism represented a threat to the American family and system.³⁹⁵ Similar to Menotti's approach to Magda Sorel in *The Consul*, with *Lizzie Borden*, Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie struggled to make sense of that system, through the tortured experience of one woman.

³⁹⁴ In this chapter, I gravitate towards the term "women's liberation" rather than "second-wave feminism." Although the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably in reference to the resurgence of feminist thought and activism during the 1960s and 1970s, "women's liberation" represented an earlier (1960s) and more radical faction(s) within what was eventually coined as the "second-wave" movement more broadly. On "women's liberation," see Sara M. Evans, "Women's Liberation: Seeing the Revolution Clearly," *Feminist Studies* 41, no. 1 (2015): 138-149.

³⁹⁵ For example, see Sylvia Clavan, "Women's Liberation and the Family," *The Family Coordinator* 19, no. 4 (1970): 317-323.

Lizzie Andrew Borden (1860-1927)

Before reconstructing and analyzing the operatic Lizzie, it is worth considering the way the “real” Lizzie Borden has been profiled and mythologized in American culture for this would have been the backdrop for audiences in the 1960s. Lizzie Andrew Borden was born in 1860 in Fall River, a booming textile hub known as “Spindle City” approximately fifty miles south of Boston. She was the second daughter of Andrew Jackson Borden and Sarah Anthony (Morse) Borden. In 1863, Lizzie’s mother died, and three years later, Andrew married Abby Durfee Gray. In 1892, neither Lizzie nor her older sister Emma (1851-1927) were married, and both continued to live in the family home, located at 92 Second Street. The sisters were thus considered “spinsters,” and during Lizzie’s trial, they were often described as such. The term “spinster,” however, did not always carry the negative connotation it does today.³⁹⁶ Lizzie’s status as a “spinster,” in and of itself, need not be immediately read as cause for concern or ridicule, and in fact, Lizzie was an extremely

³⁹⁶ According to writer Kate Bolick: “*Spinster* . . . originated in fifteenth-century Europe as an honorable way to describe the girls most of them unmarried, who spun thread for a living – one of very few respectable professions available to women. By the 1600s the term had expanded to include any unmarried woman, whether or not she spun. Not until colonial America did *spinster* become synonymous with the British *old maid*, a disparagement that cruelly involves *maiden* (a fertile virgin girl) to signify that this matured version has never outgrown her virginal state, and is so far past her prime that she never will.” See *Spinster: Making a Life of One’s Own* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2015), 17. New England historian Joseph A. Conforti suggests that “spinster” actually lost some of its bite in Victorian New England: “Lizzie and Emma Borden belonged to a large native-born class of single women in New England, and particularly Massachusetts, that consisted of far more than traditional ‘old maids’ or individuals who allegedly had no choice but to remain unmarried. A portion of these single women became highly educated, entered the professions, and assumed the identity of the so-called New Woman. They radically modified or broke with the restrictive ideal of Victorian womanhood.” See *Lizzie Borden on Trial: Murder, Ethnicity, and Gender* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 4. On the “New Woman,” see Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women’s Movement in America, 1875-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936” in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 245-296.

engaged citizen of Fall River. Prior to the murders, she was a respected member of her community.³⁹⁷

Yet for all of Lizzie's apparent success as a single woman, her life was not without its obstacles. Numerous accounts suggest that life inside the Borden household was unpleasant. For example, when the family's maid testified at Lizzie's trial, she suggested that Lizzie and Emma scarcely spoke to their parents, asserting that Lizzie and Emma often ate their meals separately.³⁹⁸ During Lizzie's inquest testimony, Lizzie's supposed animosity toward her stepmother revealed itself when she refused to refer to Abby Borden as her "mother."³⁹⁹ Many people thus concluded that a deep-seated resentment caused Lizzie to snap on that sweltering morning in August, resulting in her murdering her stepmother and then, by necessity, her father.⁴⁰⁰ This is certainly the explanation advanced by the popular schoolyard rhyme:

Lizzie Borden took an axe
And gave her mother forty whacks.
When she saw what she had done
She gave her father forty-one.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁷ As sociologist Zsuzsa Berend has argued, New England spinsters could be regarded "as champions of uncompromising morality." See "The Best or None!": Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 4 (2000): 936.

³⁹⁸ See Bridget Sullivan testimony in Edmund Pearson *Trial of Lizzie Borden, Edited, With a History of the Case* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1937), 139-140.

³⁹⁹ See Inquest Testimony of Miss Lizzie Borden in Pearson, *Trial of Lizzie Borden*, 397.

⁴⁰⁰ Other commentators believe that the murders were premeditated, suggesting, for example, that Lizzie may have been after her father's money and the role that money would play in furthering her social standing. To be sure, Andrew was a successful businessman. He owned stock in Fall River's mills and banks, as well as several rental properties and farms. Yet despite having amassed a small fortune, he was known to be rather stingy. The Borden house had none of the modern conveniences of its day and was located near the mill district. Whereas other prosperous Anglo-Saxon families lived up on the hill, away from the mills and away from the primarily Portuguese and Irish immigrants who toiled in them, the Borden family, due to Andrew Borden's miserly insistence, lived among them. Joseph A. Conforti makes much of the fact that immediately after Lizzie's acquittal, the two sisters sold their father's house and purchased a much larger house on the hill.

⁴⁰¹ Chaney, *New England Remembers Lizzie Borden*, 70-71. Chaney writes that "around the turn of the twentieth century, children started reciting an anonymous jingle that was popular even with President Teddy Roosevelt."

Since 1892, detectives, historians, creative artists, and Lizzie Borden enthusiasts have returned repeatedly to the Borden murders, hoping to solve the crimes once and for all, either by explaining Lizzie's motivation or by proposing a different killer. To cite just a few examples, in 1939, the English novelist Marie Belloc Lowndes proposed that Lizzie had killed her parents after her stepmother discovered that she was having an illicit affair with a man she had met in Europe.⁴⁰² Somewhat similarly, in 1984, the American crime novelist Evan Hunter imagined that Lizzie was a lesbian who killed her parents after her stepmother discovered her in the midst of a sexual encounter with the family maid.⁴⁰³ In 1961, Edward Radin argued that the maid and not Lizzie had committed the murders.⁴⁰⁴ Six years later, Victoria Lincoln posited that Lizzie killed her parents in an epileptic fit.⁴⁰⁵ In 1975, Paul Wendkos directed a television movie *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*, and as Karen Elizabeth Chaney points out:

[*The Legend*] capitalized on the contemporary rumor that Lizzie stripped naked before committing the murder. The film depicts Lizzie as a dull-witted zombie who went from room to room dragging a bloody ax that she somehow managed to flush down a toilet.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² See Marie Belloc Lowndes, *Lizzie Borden: A Study in Conjecture* (New York: Longman, Green and Co, 1939). As she explained in her preface, Lowndes simply did not believe that dissatisfied spinster daughters were likely to kill their fathers. Thus she suggested that passion must have "played a predominant part in the tragedy," and she set out to offer "a credible solution" or explanation for the "incredible" crime (p. vii).

⁴⁰³ See Evan Hunter, *Lizzie* (New York: Arbor House, 1984). Hunter asserted that although *Lizzie* was "a work of fiction, much of it is rooted firmly in fact" (p. 427). He wavered in discussing his approach to Lizzie's sexuality: "While not an entirely unsupported conjecture, Lizzie Borden's lesbianism should also be taken as part of the fiction" (p. 428).

⁴⁰⁴ See Edward D. Radin, *Lizzie Borden: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961).

⁴⁰⁵ See Victoria Lincoln, *A Private Disgrace: Lizzie Borden by Daylight* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967).

⁴⁰⁶ See *The Legend of Lizzie Borden*, DVD, directed by Paul Wendkos (1975; Studio City, Los Angeles, CA: CBS Studios, 2014). Chaney, *New England Remembers Lizzie Borden*, 73. More accurately, Lizzie managed to stuff the bloody axe into the toilet. As the Borden house did not have modern plumbing, flushing was not an option.

More often than not, commentators have remained convinced that Lizzie did indeed murder her parents and that she was only acquitted because the evidence against her was circumstantial and because no one wanted to believe or admit that a woman of her class could do such a thing. New England historian Joseph A. Conforti put it this way:

A jury composed of traditional Yankee men, who clung to the pities of virtuous, delicate womanhood, were not likely to convict Lizzie.⁴⁰⁷

Similarly, after completing the ballet *Fall River Legend*, an important precursor to *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait*, dancer and choreographer Agnes de Mille argued:

They [the jurors] couldn't bring themselves to think of this lady, 'the equal of your wife and mine,' as an agent of that wild and brutal butchery. Had Lizzie been of another class or race, and penniless, I believe she must have hanged.⁴⁰⁸

As historian Lisa Duggan argues, while Lizzie's trial represented a "setback for the reputation of the white home and its daughters," highlighting "the contested place and possibly dangerous desires of unmarried white women," it "resolved itself in favor of bourgeois domesticity."⁴⁰⁹ When Lizzie returned to Fall River following her acquittal, however, she was ostracized by the town's Anglo-Saxon community, adding up to a cruel fate. It would seem that Lizzie's peers, despite refusing to disrupt the status quo by convicting a member of their class, truly believed her guilty, leaving those who came later to grapple with the question of why she did it.

Richard Plant's *Lizzie Borden*

Richard Plant was one of those writers, who, as he put it, "never doubted

⁴⁰⁷ Conforti, *Lizzie Borden on Trial*, 118.

⁴⁰⁸ Agnes de Mille, *Lizzie Borden: A Dance of Death* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 76.

⁴⁰⁹ Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 123.

Lizzie's guilt," and ultimately, it was Plant's belief in her guilt that connected to his own.⁴¹⁰ Plant discovered Lizzie in 1945, at which point he had been living in the United States for seven years. Born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1910, Plant fled to Switzerland in 1933 at his father's urging and enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Basel. He earned his PhD in history and German literature in 1937 and then moved to New York. Meanwhile, his parents (his father and stepmother) committed suicide to avoid persecution by the Nazis. During World War II, Plant worked with the U.S. Office of War Information to produce anti-Nazi programs for radio broadcast behind German lines. In 1947, he began teaching at the City College of New York, and in 1948, he published his first book, *The Dragon in the Forest*, a fictionalized account of his childhood in Frankfurt and its coincidence with Hitler's rise to power.⁴¹¹

According to a City College press release, dated 21 February, 1965, Plant had become interested in Lizzie's story by sheer chance:

Back in 1945, before coming to the college, Dr. Plant was browsing in a library during a lunch hour and came upon a version of the Massachusetts murders in a book. "I couldn't stop reading about the Borden family," Dr. Plant explains. "I over-stayed my lunch time, got into an argument with the boss and was fired."⁴¹²

City College then offered a brief portrait of Plant's life and career, mulling over how Plant's love for opera had been nurtured during his childhood:

His physician father, who treated many singers from the local opera house, first took him to a performance of Hansel and Gretel at the age of seven.⁴¹³

⁴¹⁰ Plant, quoted in Press Release, City College, 21 February 1965, Folder 5, Box 7, RPP.

⁴¹¹ See Richard Plant, *The Dragon in the Forest* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948).

⁴¹² Press Release, City College.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

When Plant approached Beeson with his idea for an opera about Lizzie in 1954, “the composer was fascinated,” City College wrote, and the two men struck up their partnership; *Lizzie* faltered in 1959, “when Dr. Plant was hospitalized for a slipped disc.”⁴¹⁴ It was at this point that Kenward Elmslie, with whom Beeson had recently collaborated on *The Sweet Bye and Bye* (1956, rev. 1958), stepped in to finish the libretto.⁴¹⁵

The story that City College advertised in February of 1965 was highly sanitized. Plant was hospitalized first in 1959, and then again in 1961, but not for a slipped disc. As Beeson wrote in his “Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” Plant struggled with depression, and in the spring of 1959, he was hospitalized because of it.⁴¹⁶ Beeson saw Plant’s depression as being related to his heartbreaking family history:

During the six years we had lived with the Borden family of Fall River, shaping facts to fit fantasies, Richard’s European reticence occasionally permitted fleeting references to the *Plaut* family of Frankfurt am Main. The Catholic mother had died in 1932; Richard fled to Basel in 1933. No entreaties could induce the Jewish father to leave the still-flourishing medical practice and the *Heimatland*—but perhaps one could have been more forceful? By 1938 it was too late to emigrate, and in desperation Plaut took his own life and that of Richard’s stepmother, with means easily available to a physician.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Elmslie supplied the libretto for *The Sweet Bye and Bye*, Beeson’s third opera, drawing from the life of evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944). In his memoir, Beeson wrote that he was “indebted to Douglas Moore for both its subject matter and its librettist.” Elmslie had recently graduated from Harvard and was something of a protégé of John Latouche, Moore’s librettist for *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. See *How Operas Are Created By Composers and Librettists: The Life of Jack Beeson, American Opera Composer* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 256. In 1974, the Kansas City Lyric Theater Orchestra, Soloists, and Chorus recorded *The Sweet Bye and Bye*. See Jack Beeson and Kenward Elmslie, *The Sweet Bye and Bye: An Opera in Two Acts*, the Kansas City Lyric Theater Orchestra, conducted by Russell Patterson, Citadel Records CT-DOS-2000, 1995, CD.

⁴¹⁶ Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 22.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 22-23. The Plaut Family finished compiling a family history in 1973. See “Descendants of Rabbi Rudolf Plaut,” 1973, Folder 4, Box 34, RPP.

Beeson explained how he “could see plainly the parallels” between the Plaut family and the Borden family, namely “the strong, obdurate fathers, the stepmothers, imagined patricide and matricide, and the guilt of survivors.”⁴¹⁸ He wondered:

Was his work on the libretto a writing out and transferal of suffering, or was it actually contributing to his illness?⁴¹⁹

In Beeson’s mind, Plant was reading his family history into and through the Borden family history, and in writing *Lizzie’s* libretto, Plant was working through his sense of responsibility for his parents’ deaths.

On 15 June 1960, Plant wrote to Beeson, hinting that he might not be up to the task of finishing the libretto:

In the event that I will not be able to work on our opera concerning the Lizzie Borden story in the fall—say, by October,—you must feel free to either hire another librettist, or write the text yourself, or provide me with a collaborator. In any case, you are then free to do with the material whatever you wish, and this includes the material which we have so far finished.⁴²⁰

By 1961, according to Beeson, things had worsened:

[Plant] was having recurrent nightmares: summoning Lizzie from the dead to force her once again to kill her parents was also summoning his parents. He was convinced that these dream spirits would be exorcised only when the opera should be finished, finally, and his surrogate, Lizzie, driven by motives in part of his own invention, should murder her father and stepmother before him and an audience.⁴²¹

Through Beeson’s recollections, Plant emerges as a man utterly obsessed with Lizzie, who served as a figment of his life experience and subsequent imagination to free him from his past.

⁴¹⁸ Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 23.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴²⁰ Letter, Plant to Beeson, 15 June 1960, Box 12, Folder 1, JBP.

⁴²¹ Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 27.

For his part, Plant wrote about his parents very briefly in his 1986 book *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals*, one of the first scholarly exposes on its subject. He began his study by recalling:

I fled Frankfurt am Main on February 27, 1933, the day the Reichstag went up in flames. I was fortunate. My father . . . insisted I leave Germany as quickly as possible for Basel, Switzerland, and enroll at the university there. After encountering many obstacles, I succeeded in obtaining a passport, an object that had suddenly acquired enormous value. I gathered a few belongings and some luggage, and rushed to the Frankfurt railroad station to take the earliest train to Switzerland. Only years later did I realize how lucky I had been.⁴²²

Plant remembered that in 1935, he “began bombarding” his father “with letters urging him to leave Germany, even if it meant abandoning his patients and his valuable library.”⁴²³ His father refused to listen to his pleas, and he and his wife committed suicide shortly after the *Kristallnacht* (9-10 November 1938). Their desperate act marked a tragedy that continued to haunt Plant.

A recurring theme throughout *The Pink Triangle*, and more generally, throughout Plant’s life in the United States, is not only Plant’s sense of survivor guilt, but also the permanent emotional scarring that accompanied it. Plant returned to Germany in the 1950s, at which time he was simultaneously conducting research relating to *Lizzie Borden* and to his study of homosexual persecution:

As I sat down in the compartment of the Basel-Frankfurt express, it suddenly struck me that on the same track more than twenty years ago I had hurried away from Frankfurt to Basel. Now the train seemed to be welcoming me back as it clicked and clacked through southern Germany: “Lucky you. You came through. Lucky you...” I had become an American, and nothing in a Frankfurt reborn or revisited could frighten me or shake me, I thought. I was wrong.⁴²⁴

⁴²² Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 1.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

It would seem that as Plant worked on *Lizzie* along with *The Pink Triangle*, he sought to come to terms with the trauma he continued to endure and with the responsibility he continued to bear with the Holocaust persistently in his rearview mirror. As an “American” vessel through which to filter his European past and experience, moreover, Plant’s *Lizzie* may be understood as representing Plant’s struggle to “become an American.”

Importantly, theories of survivor guilt began to proliferate in the United States during the 1960s, primarily among psychologists who drew inspiration from Freud.⁴²⁵ As historian Ruth Leys summarizes, two psychoanalytic assumptions that became entrenched were “that survivors suffered from guilt for outliving dead relatives, friends, and fellow prisoners, and that under extremity they tended to identify with their tormentors (which is why, according to the Freudian theory of the superego, they felt guilty.”⁴²⁶ From the very beginning, these assumptions could be controversial. One objection to the entire theory of survivor guilt is that it deflects blame from the real culprits onto victims themselves. According to Lawrence L. Langer, a scholar of Holocaust literature, survivor Primo Levi “noted an increasing interest in the conduct of the victims and a growing indifference to the behavior of the killers” as the years passed after World War II.⁴²⁷ Langer explains Levi’s decision to write *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) “forty years after the collapse of Auschwitz” as follows:

⁴²⁵ Survivor guilt was sometimes referred to as “concentration camp syndrome” during the 1960s, connecting the theory’s emergence directly to the Holocaust and to efforts to come to terms with it. Survivor guilt has also been discussed in terms of the AIDS epidemic in the United States. See Walt Odets, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995), 93-98.

⁴²⁶ Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 61.

⁴²⁷ Lawrence L. Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 34.

Perhaps realizing how some of the gloomiest moments in *If This Is a Man [Survival in Auschwitz]* might be misread as an effort to blame the victims, Levi returned in *The Drowned and the Saved* to this troublesome theme.⁴²⁸

Additionally, as Leys points out, some commentators “objected that the notion of survivor guilt was simply a projection onto the survivor of American psychoanalysts’ own feelings of guilt for having lived through the war in the safety of the United States.”⁴²⁹ While Leys notes that “this seems much too simplistic,” this formulation of survivor guilt speaks closest to Plant’s experience.⁴³⁰ Strictly speaking, Plant did not *survive* Nazi persecution, he *escaped* it, living in relative safety and comfort, first in Basel and later, in New York. Thus Plant may have struggled so acutely with the legacy of the Holocaust because he felt guilty for not having been forced to survive it, and he made it his life’s work to illuminate more fully the atrocities committed by the Third Reich, as evinced by *The Dragon in the Forest* and *The Pink Triangle*.

While Plant himself never wrote explicitly about any connection between his past and *Lizzie Borden*, he apparently did not object to Beeson’s writing about it. Beeson sent a copy of “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*” to Plant, seeking the writer’s feedback, and Plant’s main suggestion was that Beeson not downplay his role as the original librettist.⁴³¹ He voiced no objection to Beeson’s discussion of his family’s history and its relevance to *Lizzie*.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴²⁹ Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, 24.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁴³¹ Letter, Plant to Beeson, 9 April 1968, Folder 22, Box 1, RPP.

Jack Beeson's *Lizzie Borden*

If Plant's own familial history lurked beneath his fascination with Lizzie Borden, Beeson's approach to her as an operatic subject was less immediate. Beeson was born and raised in Muncie, Indiana, a town made famous by Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd's landmark sociological study of 1929, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*.⁴³² Upon graduation from high school in Muncie, Beeson attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, studying composition with Bernard Rogers and Howard Hanson and earning his BM in 1942 and MM in 1944.⁴³³ During his childhood, Beeson had become fascinated by opera—mainly by listening to the Metropolitan Opera's weekly radio broadcasts, as he recalled in a 1994 interview with Leonard Lehrman.⁴³⁴ While at Eastman, however, Beeson did not focus on the operatic genre. As he recalled in his memoir:

It was said that the opera department [at Eastman] had been vibrant and nationally well-known in the late twenties and early thirties, but had been on short rations since 1933. It was in that year that Hanson's *Merry Mount*, commissioned by the Met, had been premiered there with Laurence Tibbett in the leading role. Apparently Hanson had been terribly upset by its cool reception and thereafter had turned against the medium in his school, which he ran efficiently but autocratically.⁴³⁵

⁴³² See Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, foreword by Clark Wissler (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929). In 1937, the Lynds published a follow-up study entitled *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937). In his memoir, Beeson claimed that when he introduced himself to Aaron Copland in New York in 1944, the older composer responded enthusiastically: "Well, so you are now our typically American composer! You can make a great deal of that distinction if you handle it right! People all think I reflect the American heartland in my music, but I'm just a Jew from Brooklyn." Aaron Copland, quoted in Beeson, *How Operas Are Created*, 27.

⁴³³ Beeson knew that he wanted to attend Curtis, Julliard, or Eastman. He recalled in his memoir: "I found the names of the composers on their faculties and ordered music written by them. There was nothing to be had from the Curtis composer, I wasn't interested in the scores of the Julliard composers, but I was impressed by the music of Hanson and Rogers at Eastman." This is interesting in hindsight, given that Rosario Scalero taught at Curtis; he mentored both Samuel Barber and Gian-Carlo Menotti, who went on to have successful careers as opera composers. See Beeson, *How Operas Are Created*, 40.

⁴³⁴ See Leonard Lehrman, "An Interview With Jack Beeson," *Opera Monthly* 7, no. 1 (1994): 17. Found in Box 2, JBP.

⁴³⁵ Beeson, *How Operas Are Created*, 53. Howard Hanson was director of the Eastman School of Music from 1924 until 1964. According to Ruth T. Watanabe and James Perone, Hanson "built the institution into one of the finest

When Beeson moved to New York City in 1944, he became reacquainted with opera by way of Columbia University, attaching himself to the school's opera program as an accompanist and conductor. In 1945, he served as coach and assistant conductor for the premiere of Normand Lockwood's opera *The Scarecrow*, which took place in Columbia's Brander Matthews Theatre.⁴³⁶ That same year he began teaching courses at Columbia, and in 1967, two years after *Lizzie Borden's* premiere, he was appointed MacDowell Professor of Music. While *Lizzie* was not Beeson's first opera, it was his first major success and it helped to establish his reputation as an opera composer.⁴³⁷

Contrary to what the 1965 City College press release claimed, Beeson was initially rather skeptical about the idea of writing an opera featuring the New England murderess. In his "Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*," he explained that when Plant introduced himself and his project in 1954, he was not surprised to hear that Plant had been struggling to interest a composer.⁴³⁸

universities of music in the Americas." See "Hanson, Howard," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press (accessed 2 May 2017), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/12342>. As Beeson recalled, during the 1920s and 1930s, Hanson had a keen interest in American opera, both at Eastman and beyond, yet his experience with *Merry Mount* apparently dampened his enthusiasm. The Metropolitan Opera Company premiered *Merry Mount* on 10 February 1934. Music critics were hard on the opera, and after the 1934 season, the Met dropped *Merry Mount* from its repertory.

⁴³⁶ See Program, *The Scarecrow*, May 9 to 12, 1945, Box 1, Columbia Theater Associates (CTA), Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University. In 1947, Beeson served as assistant conductor, coach, and rehearsal pianist for Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother Of Us All*. See Program, *The Mother of Us All*, May 12 to 15, 1947, Box 1, CTA.

⁴³⁷ Prior to *Lizzie*, Beeson composed the operas *Jonah* (1950), *Hello Out There!* (1954), and *The Sweet Bye and Bye* (1956).

⁴³⁸ Beeson, "The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*," 15. According to Beeson, Plant came backstage after the final performance of Beeson's opera *Hello Out There!* to introduce himself to Beeson. *Hello Out There!* was produced by the Columbia Opera Workshop. See Columbia University Bicentennial, The Opera Workshop, under the direction of Willard Rhodes and Felix Brentano presents *Malady of Love*, Libretto by Lewis Allan, Music by Lehman Engel, and *Hello Out There*, Text adapted from the play by William Saroyan, Music by Jack Beeson, Brander Matthews Hall, May 27, 28, 29, 30, 1954, "Columbia Theater Associates - Programs (1951-1958)," Box 1, Columbia Theater Associates, 1893-1958, Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

Beeson and Plant met again a month later, at which point Beeson learned that Plant saw “the Borden family in its Fall River setting as a distillation of the main currents of New England history. Mr. Borden is the latter-day version of the hanging judge of Salem; Lizzie is the passionate, repressed, upper-class unemployable Victorian spinster.”⁴³⁹ Notably, Plant had a decidedly mid-twentieth-century perspective on Lizzie the “spinster,” for as historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains, the late nineteenth century marked the dawn of “the single, highly educated, economically autonomous New Woman.”⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, Kate Bolick colorfully describes how the years between 1890 and 1920 represented “the single woman’s most glorious moment yet,” while the following decades were less promising; during World War II, “single women enjoyed a short, sweet revival (before being devoured altogether by the 1950s).”⁴⁴¹ Thus Plant’s approach to Lizzie as a spinster was heavily influenced by the culture surrounding marriage in the United States during the 1950s.⁴⁴² Plant also felt that Lizzie’s story was “archetypal (Elektra with the parents switched),” and it was this notion, *Lizzie* as a play on Elektra, that appeared to entice Beeson, a lover of theater, the most.⁴⁴³

⁴³⁹ Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 15.

⁴⁴⁰ Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne,” 245.

⁴⁴¹ Bolick, *Spinster*, 167-168.

⁴⁴² For an in-depth discussion of the culture surrounding marriage in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s and its connection to the culture of the Cold War, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era, Fully Revised and Updated 20th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 1988, 1999, 2008). In fact, Plant told Theodore Strongin that one of the reasons he turned Lizzie into the older sister was to bring “closer the specter of spinsterhood.” See Strongin, “The Lizzie Borden Case.”

⁴⁴³ Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 16. Beeson appeared somewhat anxious, however, that *Lizzie Borden* not simply be regarded as a “another *Elektra*, even a New England one.” Here, Beeson was referring to Richard Strauss’s 1909 opera *Elektra*, the first of several collaborations between Strauss and librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Interestingly, Plant occasionally signed off in letters to Beeson as “Hugo von Hofmannsthal.”

Beeson gradually grew intent on the idea of writing “a psychologically oriented opera of characterization” with Lizzie as the protagonist.⁴⁴⁴ He explained:

If the music, words and the dramatic shape work together to convince the audience that Lizzie not only can but also *must* murder her parents, the piece could work; but if there is any substantial miscalculation, the audience won’t go up the stairs with Lizzie to murder her—their—parents. And if they won’t go up the stairs, there won’t be any point at all in their having come to the theatre.⁴⁴⁵

Thus Beeson was intrigued by what would cause a woman to commit murder. He argued:

We were not writing an opera about murders, but about why a woman (largely of our making) would kill.⁴⁴⁶

As he and Plant worked together, and later, after Elmslie joined the project, a collective fascination with Lizzie’s struggle as being akin to Elektra’s became the driving force behind the opera. Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie ultimately subtitled the opera “A Family Portrait,” and they molded Lizzie’s father and stepmother into thoroughly despicable people. By the end of the opera, one empathizes with Lizzie and is more than ready for her to do the deed. In the analyses that accompany the following reconstruction of the script and score, I demonstrate how Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie convince audiences to understand, encourage, and perhaps even identify with Lizzie, at the same time that they do not succeed in allowing Lizzie to truly emancipate herself from the oppressive operatic world they have created.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 19.

Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait

Lizzie Borden begins in the living room of Andrew Borden's "dark, imposing Victorian house" in Fall River.⁴⁴⁷ Lizzie appears rehearsing a small children's choir. The Reverend Harrington arrives and thanks Lizzie for her devotion to the children and to the church. As the children and the Reverend leave, Andrew enters, and he and Lizzie argue when Lizzie asks him for money to buy a dress. Lizzie complains that her stepmother Abbie "wears a new dress made by the best dressmaker in the town."⁴⁴⁸ Andrew ignores this comment and launches into a credo, extolling the merits of all his hard work. In the second scene, Lizzie and her younger sister Margret lament their imprisonment in their father's house. Then Lizzie tells Margret that her suitor, a sea captain named Jason MacFarlane, is coming that evening to ask Andrew for Margret's hand in marriage.

Act II also begins in the living room, but this time, Abbie is the center of attention. She sits at a harmonium, accompanying herself as she sings a parlor song. Abbie then convinces Andrew that he should buy her a grand piano in honor of their upcoming wedding anniversary. When she complains about Evangeline's children (Lizzie and Margret) and Evangeline's furnishings, Andrew concedes that he will remove Evangeline's portrait from the living room and that together, they will purchase "new pictures to embellish the walls."⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ See stage directions in Jack Beeson, Kenward Elmslie, and Richard Plant, *Lizzie Borden: A Family Portrait in Three Acts, Piano-Vocal Score* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1967), 4. According to the score, the setting is "Fall River, Massachusetts in the Eighties."

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

Lizzie and Margret join their parents in the living room, and Abbie boasts about the changes she and Andrew are planning. Lizzie becomes visibly angry and lashes out at Abbie, but their quarrel is interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. It is the Reverend Harrington, accompanied by Captain MacFarlane, who has come to ask for Margret's hand. Andrew responds rather wickedly that he will give the captain his consent to marry, not Margret, but Lizzie. He then turns on Lizzie, mocking her for her age and lack of a suitor. "You should have been born a man: then you could take what you want," he snarls.⁴⁵⁰ The captain leaves, and Lizzie and her father enact what appears to be a well-established ritual in which Andrew berates Lizzie physically and verbally, and she absorbs and internalizes his abuse. Act II concludes with an extended scene for Lizzie alone in the darkened living room. Beeson and Plant referred to this scene, in which Lizzie first begins to lose her ability to cope with her situation as Lizzie's "mad scene."

In Act III, Captain MacFarlane returns to the Borden house to rescue Margret. As Lizzie faces the fact that she will be left alone with her father and stepmother, she slips into fantasy. She puts on her mother's wedding dress, intended for Margret, and imagines herself as bride. She begins fantasizing about Jason and, as we are led to believe through the stage directions, masturbating.⁴⁵¹ Abbie catches Lizzie in the act and mocks her mercilessly. To make matters worse, she threatens to tell Andrew. Abbie goes up the stairs for her afternoon nap, and minutes later, Lizzie charges up after her, grabbing the scimitar (Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant's version of the hatchet) from the wall.⁴⁵² When Andrew comes home and calls for Abbie, he looks up the stairs

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 150-151.

⁴⁵¹ Beeson later described "Lizzie's love scene aria" as "actually a kind of masturbatory scene." See "The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*," 33.

⁴⁵² The scimitar, a short sword with a curved blade associated with Eastern countries, hangs on the wall of Abbie's "Turkish corner." During the 1880s and 1890s, Turkish corners were all the rage in the United States. These were

and sees Lizzie, still in Evangeline's wedding dress. He rushes up the stairs and into the bedroom to find his wife; Lizzie follows him.

The opera concludes in the living room, several years after Lizzie's acquittal, with a scene strikingly similar to the opera's opening. Lizzie has taken her father's place in her father's house. She lives alone, hoarding her money, just like her father before her. As she counts her assets, a children's choir (composed of the same voices that she conducted in Act I), jeers from offstage, singing the popular schoolyard rhyme "Lizzie Borden Took an Axe."

Making *Lizzie Borden*

Without a doubt, it was Plant who set *Lizzie Borden* on her path. According to Beeson, it became clear to him early on that Plant had "read all the extensive Lizzie Borden literature, as well as the trial testimony, newspaper accounts, and even a book on the Fall River Steamship Line."⁴⁵³ Plant's personal papers reveal the lengths to which he had gone to engage in his research. A folder entitled "Lizzie Borden - Research Notes" contains Plant's drafts of aria texts, ideas for scenes, as well as musings on the relevance of Lizzie's membership in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the history of Calvinism, Puritanism, Fall River and its shipping lines, and possible parallels between the Borden Family story and Greek tragedy. Plant took notes on Lizzie's trial, relying on Edward Pearson's 1937 *Trial of Lizzie Borden, Edited, With a History of the Case*.⁴⁵⁴ He also had a copy of the uncorrected proofs of Edward D. Radin's 1961 book, *Lizzie Borden: The Untold*

placed in nooks of Victorian homes, including stairwells, and included "exotic" furniture, pillows, textiles, knick-knacks, or weaponry like the scimitar, inspired by ideas about the "East." See Mark Hinchman, *The Fairchild Books Dictionary of Interior Design, Third Edition* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 195.

⁴⁵³ Beeson, "The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*," 18.

⁴⁵⁴ See Pearson, *Trial of Lizzie Borden*.

Story.⁴⁵⁵ Plant was unconvinced, however, by the argument Radin put forth; he mentioned *The Untold Story* to Haskel Frankel of the *Saturday Review*, as he described the criticism he received from Lizzie Borden buffs for omitting the housemaid Bridget from the opera's libretto:

This dropping of Bridget has led to phone calls of protest from people who go along with Edward D. Radin's book, *Lizzie Borden: The Untold Story*. Radin's book claims that Bridget, not Lizzie, was guilty of the murders of Mr. and Mrs. Borden but he offers no motive for Bridget. Ah, if only those people who protested would picket outside a performance of the opera. It would be so helpful. If I had money I would hire some pickets.⁴⁵⁶

While Radin's book failed to exert much influence on Plant, Plant's engagement with it demonstrates just how fully he immersed himself in his subject.

Both Plant's and Beeson's personal papers include numerous drafts of the libretto for the opening scene of Act I, such that it is possible to reconstruct the evolution of the script. Plant's "first draft" of the libretto is undated and bears the title "The Prison," pointing quite explicitly to Lizzie's domestic captivity.⁴⁵⁷ In this draft, Lizzie goes by the name Liza Barton, Margret by Maggie, and the Reverend Harrington refers to his church as St. James, rather than Old Harbor. The dramatic framework for the opera's opening scene, however, conforms completely to the final version. The scene begins with Liza conducting the children's choir. Then the Reverend Harrington arrives; he speaks to Liza about the sorry state of his church and thanks her for her efforts. When the children and the Reverend leave, Andrew enters. He and Liza argue about a new dress, and the scene concludes with Andrew's "credo."

⁴⁵⁵ See Radin, *Lizzie Borden: The Untold Story*. Plant's copy of the uncorrected proofs of Radin's book may be found in Folder 1, Box 16, RPP.

⁴⁵⁶ Plant, quoted in Haskel Frankel, "Teaching in Triplicate," *Saturday Review*, 10 April 1965. Radin wrote to Plant two days later, challenging him on his assertion that Radin had offered no motive for Bridget. See Letter, Edward D. Radin to Professor Richard Plant, 12 April 1965, Box 13, Folder 1, JBP.

⁴⁵⁷ See "The Prison, first draft," Folder 1, Box 7, RPP.

One of the most striking differences between the “first version” of the opening scene and the final version concerns the opening hymn. In Plant’s first draft, the children sing an exoticist hymn text of Plant’s invention:

Remember all the people
Who live in far off lands
In strange and lonely cities
Or roam the desert sands
Or farm the mountain pastures
Or till the endless plains
Where children wade through rice fields
And watch the camel trains⁴⁵⁸

Beeson later found an actual hymn text that he preferred for the opera’s opening. In his “Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” Beeson recalled how he “leafed through shelves of hymnbooks,” searching for “the right text.”⁴⁵⁹ He explained:

It had to be free of copyright, characteristically a children’s hymn, and shaped in such a manner that my musical setting would also fit the traditional doggerel [“*Lizzie Borden* took an axe”] with which we wished to *end* the opera.⁴⁶⁰

Beeson finally found what he wanted:

The right text . . . leapt from the page, for it not only fulfilled my requirement that the first lines given to characters in opera should limn them verbally and musically, but also expressed the “work for the night is coming” aspect of the Calvinist ethic.⁴⁶¹

Thus, he settled on a hymn entitled “Toiling Early,” which appeared in a hymnal from 1896:

Toiling early in the morning,
Catching moments through the day,
Nothing small or lowly scorning,

⁴⁵⁸ See “The Prison, first draft,” Folder 1, Box 7, RPP.

⁴⁵⁹ Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 21.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

While we work, and watch, and pray.⁴⁶²

A copy of this hymn text appears in Plant's papers, its discovery attributed to the composer.⁴⁶³

Plant's papers include another undated copy of the opening scene. This one is titled "House of Darkness: The Prison, revised & shortened ed. 2." At this point, Plant changed Liza to Lizzie, Maggie to Margret, and St. James to Old Harbor Church. He did not, however, update the opening hymn. That change occurred in "The Prison, revised & shortened, ed. 3," hand-dated 1959. Thus together, Beeson and Plant completed the first half of the first act of *Lizzie Borden*. Plant's papers include a bound copy of the piano-vocal score for the first act, as well as the beginning of the second act.⁴⁶⁴ In the final, published version of the piano-vocal score, Beeson and Plant's second act became Scene 2 of Act I. Plant's copy of the partial score is inscribed by Beeson: "for Richard, from Jack: Twelfth Night, 1961," its date (January 6, 1961) indicating that Beeson and Plant completed this work prior to Elmslie's addition to the project.⁴⁶⁵

A comparison between this copy of the score and the published edition reveals that very little changed between these two versions of Act I, Scene 1.⁴⁶⁶ At the same time, even the slightest

⁴⁶² "Toiling Early" appears in the 1896 *Standard Hymnal for General Use*. See Thomas MacKellar and C.C. Converse, "Toiling Early (Christian Endeavor Hymn)" in *The Standard Hymnal for General Use* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1896), 43.

⁴⁶³ "Toiling Early in the Morning," Folder 1, Box 7, RPP. Beeson's hunt for the "right text" for this hymn is just one example of the "ancillary research," as Lewis put it, that he and Plant engaged in. Brenda Lewis, interview with the author, Westport, Connecticut, 7 March 2016.

⁴⁶⁴ 1961 Piano-Vocal Score, Box 8, RPP. Plant's personal papers also include a copy of a 1962 letter to Plant, from Plant's lawyer Nathaniel L. Rock, explaining that Plant is to be credited with the scenario for the entire opera, as well as the libretto for Act I. See Letter, Nathaniel L. Rock to Plant, 19 October 1962, Folder 22, Box 1, RPP. Both Beeson and Elmslie were cc'd on this letter.

⁴⁶⁵ 1961 Piano-Vocal Score.

⁴⁶⁶ There are occasional changes to notes, stage directions, and text, but generally, such changes are small.

changes to the libretto, many of which made the text more idiomatic and singable, tended to have the effect of reifying the characters, particularly Andrew. For example, near the end of his “credo,” Andrew sings about all his hard work and the wealth it has accumulated. In Plant and Beeson’s 1961 score, Andrews sings: “The weak deceiver to failure doomed.”⁴⁶⁷ His line eventually became: “The weak shall never inherit the earth,” turning a well-known verse from Matthew’s Gospel on its head.⁴⁶⁸ This seemingly insignificant change, which required Beeson to make no adaptation to the music, presented Andrew as even more of a villain. Here was a man who did not simply mimic Biblical rhetoric, he actively intervened on the Bible, twisting its meaning. Beeson and Elmslie went on to make more extensive changes as well, often in an effort to condense the libretto. For example, in the 1961 piano-vocal score, Andrew interrupts himself in the middle of his “credo,” briefly recalling how his first wife gave all her money away to Reverend Harrington as she lay dying:

When Evangeline was failing he cajoled and flattered,
He beguiled her sick mind,
Her put her against me
She gave the church all she owned.⁴⁶⁹

When Beeson and Elmslie revised the libretto, they omitted Andrew’s recollection, skipping ahead to the next phrase in his tirade:

He deludes my daughters. He defrauds their minds.
They waste my money.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁷ 1961 Piano-Vocal Score, 46.

⁴⁶⁸ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 42.

⁴⁶⁹ 1961 Piano-Vocal Score, 44-45.

⁴⁷⁰ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 41-42.

By cutting Andrew's recollection, which served to explain Andrew's anger with Reverend Harrington and the Church, Beeson and Elmslie helped to ensure that from the opera's outset, Andrew would never elicit empathetic responses.

Elmslie inherited not only a complete first scene of the opera but also bits of material for later scenes. For example, Plant had already begun to work on the second scene of Act I (Margret and Lizzie's "garden" duet), part of which was included in Beeson and Plant's 1961 piano-vocal score. Plant had also started drafting Abbie's parlor song, which ultimately served as the opening to Act II, as well as Lizzie's mad scene for the end of Act II. It was Abbie's song that apparently convinced Elmslie it was worth becoming involved in the *Lizzie Borden* project. When Beeson passed this material on to Elmslie, the poet was inspired:

[Ken] says that at first he was disinclined to get involved . . . But he says that R's idea of a "Bird Song" has won him over; he's been filling it in—"like a magpie" he'll be able to use some of the leftovers from R's nest—and now he's hooked. He's falling in love with Abbie, he says. Coincidence, *he* has a stepmother, too . . .⁴⁷¹

Elmslie must have been "falling in love with Abbie," the caricature of the evil stepmother and the amateur soprano simultaneously, for in the final version of the "Bird Song," this is precisely who Abbie reveals herself to be.

In the published piano-vocal score, as the prelude to Act II subsides, a gentle, arpeggiated accompaniment takes over (Example 2.1). Abbie appears seated in the living room, accompanying herself at the harmonium as she sings Beeson's imitation of a nineteenth-century parlor song, of which the composer happened to be especially proud. In the "Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*" Beeson explained:

⁴⁷¹ Beeson, "The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*," 28.

Ever since Ken sent me his last draft of Abbie's "Bird-Song," I've known what the musical setting will be, but I hadn't sat down to write it out until today. Singers will love it (if they have a high C-sharp) and some composers will think I'm out of my mind in writing "such stuff."⁴⁷²

The "Bird Song" begins innocently enough but gradually becomes over-the-top and comical, making a mockery of Abbie's musical ambitions. Abbie sings the first binary-form verse without ornamentation. The A section opens in a lyrical A major, its melody unfolding mainly in intervals of seconds and thirds and concluding with a series of rising notes on a slight diminuendo and ritardando, above a C-sharp⁷ chord. After a breath, the B section begins in a more animated F-sharp major, characterized by an acceleration in tempo and a less conjunct melodic line. At the end of the B section, the key of A major returns, and following a series of rising notes on a diminuendo and ritardando (an allusion to the figure at the end of the A section), Abbie concludes:

O I'd wing to you swiftly
My springtime love.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² Ibid., 29.

⁴⁷³ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 79.

Example 2.1

Abbie's "Bird Song," Verse 1

Moving along and with freedom

♩ = 80 *lunga* *mp*

Abbie *freedom lunga* L'hi - ron - del - le, l'hi - ron - del - le, Swal - lows cir - cle in the

mp *p* *mp* *f* *lunga* *Red.* *Red.* *Red.*

Abbie sky, O if I dared to fol - low swal - lows Where

poco cresc. *Red.* *Red.* *Red.*

Abbie ev - er they may fly, Snow - bells and ros - es would

pochiss rit. poco dim. *accel. al p* *a tempo cresc. ed accel.*

pochiss rit. *accel. al* *a tempo cresc. ed accel.* *p*

Red. *Red.* * *Red.* *Red.*

Example 2.1 (Continued)

216 *mf* (♩ = 88c)
 Abbie bloom far be - low, And my heart would re -

dim. e rit. *p* *mp* *a tempo cresc.* (♩ = 80)
 Abbie joyce where - ev - er I'd go, O I'd wing to you

poco rit.
 Abbie swift - ly My spring - time love.

As Abbie finishes the first verse, Andrew comes down the stairs, and although according to the stage directions, “Abbie pretends not to notice him,” she launches enthusiastically into the song’s second verse, now singing about a nightingale rather than a swallow and putting on a bit of a show.⁴⁷⁴ Beeson, for example, adds an impressive octave leap (C-sharp5 to C-sharp6), thus allowing Abbie to highlight her imagined vocal prowess (Example 2.2). When Abbie reaches the

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 79.

end of the second verse, however, she finds that she cannot finish it. As she sings the final phrase (O I'll cling to you always/My springtime...), she omits the final word (love), because, as indicated in the stage directions, "the keys [on the harmonium] will not sound."⁴⁷⁵ She tries to make the notes sound again. Finally, she becomes "quite irritated and punches out the faulty keys," exclaiming:

I can't go on!
This key doesn't work,
And this key, and this key!⁴⁷⁶

Abbie and Andrew then argue about the harmonium, about Evangeline, and about Lizzie and Margret. When Abbie threatens to retreat to the servant's quarters (and to withhold sex), Andrew relents. He agrees to buy Abbie a piano, as well as new furnishings for the house. Satisfied, Abbie returns to her song. She sings the second verse again, a little faster now, and going wild with embellishments, adds running sixteenth notes and a chromatic descent spanning more than an octave (Example 2.3).

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 82.

Example 2.2

Abbie's "Bird Song," Verse 2

Abbie *p* Ros - si - gnol, O Ros - si - gnol, O night - in - gale of sweet ro - mance, *mp* On

p *p* *p* *mp* *ped.* *una corda* *ped.* *ped.* *ped.* *tre corda*

Abbie *poco cresc.* *mf* *non p* *poco sfzp cresc.*
tremb - ling branch a - light - ing, hear the night - -

p *p* *mf* *p* *ped.* *ped.* *ped.*

Abbie *mf* *dim.* *corta*
- in - gale! Her sil - ver song en - chants! _____

mf *mp* *mf* *p* *ped.* *ped.* *ped.* *corta*

Example 2.3

Abbie's Birdsong, Verse 2 (second time)

Moving along
♩ = 80c (in a very good humor) *a tempo*
mf *poco riten.* *a tempo* *più riten.* *a tempo*

Abbie
Ros - si - gnol, O Ros - si - gnol, O night - in - gale of sweet ro -

mp *p* *poco riten.* *mp* *p* *più riten.* *a tempo* *p*

Ped. *una corda* *Ped.* *Ped.* *in tempo un poco allargando*

Abbie
mance, On trem - bling branch a light - ing hear

mp *poco* *f* *dim*

Ped. *Ped.* *Ped.*

Abbie
the night - - - in - gale! Her

a tempo *poco sfz cresc.* *mf*

a tempo *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

Ped. *mf* *Ped.*

Abbie
sil - ver song en - chants!

rit. *pp*

mp *mf* *corta* *molto* *p*

mp *Ped.* *mf* *Ped.*

As Lizzie and Margret enter the living room, Abbie begins her third and final verse, adding further embellishments. In the 1967 televised production, Brenda Lewis steps into the frame, a stony-faced Lizzie, and Margret, played by soprano Anne Elgar, joins her, looking weary and exasperated.⁴⁷⁷ Before Abbie finishes her song, she turns to Andrew, Lizzie, and Margret, and as indicated in the stage directions:

She pantomimes: the diva, bowing elegantly; then the audience; then the diva accepting adulation; then the audience again. Her daughters ignore her.⁴⁷⁸

Margret buries her head in her book, and Lizzie busies herself with an embroidery project. Andrew (Herbert Beattie), however, claps enthusiastically. Played by soprano Ellen Faull, Abbie thus styles herself an obnoxious amateur diva, her supposed talent having completely gone to her head.

When the Boston Lyric Opera presented a chamber version of *Lizzie Borden* in 2013, soprano Caroline Worra played Abbie, and she sang the “Bird Song” so badly – exaggerating all of the ornaments and occasionally missing notes – that the audience laughed at Abbie’s lack of skill and musical taste.⁴⁷⁹ In Worra’s hands, Abbie emerged not only as a caricature of the scheming, evil stepmother, but also a sloppy amateur soprano. As Susan McClary has pointed out, audiences (and scholars) sometimes take great joy in ridiculing sopranos, particularly those who are past their prime or simply not up to their task.⁴⁸⁰ In terms of the phenomenon of the amateur soprano, we

⁴⁷⁷ See *Lizzie Borden*, DVD, directed by Kirk Browning.

⁴⁷⁸ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 98.

⁴⁷⁹ The Boston Lyric Opera premiered their chamber version of *Lizzie Borden* on 20 November 2013. Caroline Worra played Abbie, and Heather Johnson played Lizzie.

⁴⁸⁰ Susan McClary, “Forward: The Undoing of Opera: Toward a Feminist Criticism of Music,” in Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xvi. McClary writes that she has “colleagues who gleefully invent names of abuse for fading sopranos – names such as Miss Piggy and others too hurtful to mention.”

might recall the “career” of Florence Foster Jenkins (1868-1944), the New York socialite with operatic ambitions but little vocal talent. In 1941, Jenkins recorded a number of arias and songs with Melotone Studios, including most famously, Mozart’s aria for the Queen of the Night. RCA Victor later collected and released these recordings as albums, and listeners continue to mock them with glee.⁴⁸¹ In 1944, Jenkins gave a sold-out recital at Carnegie Hall; as musicologist Ryan Ebright points out, Jenkins was apparently “unaware of her vocal limitations, which likely contributed to her appeal.”⁴⁸² Worra’s Abbie also seemed unaware of her vocal shortcomings, adding comedy to this scene, which otherwise serves to set up the thoroughly antagonistic relationship between Abbie and Lizzie.

In Act II, Beeson and Elmslie also establish more fully the antagonism between Lizzie and Andrew. Most notably, Andrew man-handles Lizzie in front of the Captain, berating her and shaking her like a ragdoll. After the Captain leaves, Andrew continues to bully his eldest daughter. According to Beeson’s stage directions:

[Andrew’s] glance falls on Lizzie, collapsed near the door to her room. He draws strength from her weakness...strides toward her, commandingly and she cringes, kneeling, head bowed...almost as though repeating yet again a well-remembered ritual.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸¹ See Florence Foster Jenkins, *The Glory (???) of the Human Voice*, © 1992 by RCA Victor Gold Seal, 09026-61175-2, Compact disc. Outside the realm of her recordings, Jenkins continues to provide audiences with entertainment. For example, Peter Quilter’s play *Glorious! The True Story of Florence Foster Jenkins, the Worst Singer in the World* opened in London’s West End in 2005. In 2015, Catherine Frot starred in *Marguerite*, a film loosely inspired by the life and career of Jenkins, and in 2016, Meryl Streep starred in a film unambiguously entitled *Florence Foster Jenkins*.

⁴⁸² Ryan Ebright, “Jenkins, Florence Foster,” *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2241860> (accessed 2 May 2017).

⁴⁸³ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 155.

Lizzie asks: “What am I forbidden now?”⁴⁸⁴ Andrew answers: “To see the preacher.”⁴⁸⁵ As the scene progresses, Andrew forbids Lizzie from any contact with the outside world. When he goes up the stairs to join Abbie (who has gone to bed), Lizzie continues the abusive “ritual” she has just endured in her head, and her imprisonment – both physical and mental – becomes increasingly apparent. Lizzie switches between first-person perspective and the more detached third-person perspective, an indication of her deteriorating mind. Lizzie’s mad scene concludes with Lizzie essentially giving up her sense of self. In the television production, Lewis wraps herself in the rug from the living-room floor, covering herself almost entirely, as she makes her final switch from the first-person to third-person perspective:

I’ll breathe water, swallow earth.
Lizzie has a body.
Lizzie has a head.
Lizzie’s cut to pieces.
Lizzie must be dead.⁴⁸⁶

She sings these lines in an unstable and irregular manner, halting between each assertion of frenzied sixteenth notes (Example 2.4). By the end of this tour de force scene, the audience should pity Lizzie, her impossible domestic situation having pushed her over the edge.⁴⁸⁷ John W. Freeman contextualized the Glimmerglass Opera’s 1996 revival of *Lizzie Borden* by pointing to the

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 155.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 155.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁸⁷ According to Phyllis Pancella, one of the difficulties of Lizzie’s mad scene is that it is “a very lonely mad scene.” Pancella recalled that the 1996 Glimmerglass production/1999 NYCO production featured a stark, minimalist set and that it was difficult to pull off the mad scene without anyone or anything on stage. Phyllis Pancella, interview with the author, Tallahassee, Florida, 22 May 2016.

opera's connection to "the timely subject of domestic abuse" and its consequences, emphasized most acutely in this scene.⁴⁸⁸

Example 2.4

Conclusion of Lizzie's mad scene

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system shows Lizzie's vocal line in common time (C) with lyrics: "I'll breathe wa-ter, swal-low earth. Liz-zie has a bo-dy." The piano accompaniment is in common time, marked with dynamics *f*, *cresc.*, and *ff*. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "Liz-zie has a head. Liz-zie's cut to piec-es". The piano accompaniment features a key signature change to two sharps (D major) and a time signature change to 5/4. The third system shows Lizzie's vocal line with lyrics: "Liz-zie must be dead. (duh)". The piano accompaniment is in 5/4 time, marked with dynamics *sfz*. The score concludes with the instruction "CURTAIN" and "End of Act II".

⁴⁸⁸ John W. Freeman, *The Metropolitan Opera: Stories of the Great Opera, Volume 2* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 21.

Interestingly, however, it is not Andrew's abuse that causes Lizzie to resort to violence, but rather, Abbie's plot to throw Lizzie out of the house. In Act III, when Abbie catches Lizzie masturbating, Lizzie is wearing her mother's wedding dress and imagining Jason's hands on her:

His hands must move like clouds against the wings of the swallows.
His hands must move like warm clouds; must move like leaves.⁴⁸⁹

According to Beeson's stage directions, Abbie "catches a glimpse of Lizzie" and:

She moves more toward the open door into the girls' room; when she sees and hears clearly what Lizzie is doing, she stops short, on the threshold...⁴⁹⁰

Then she steps into the room, interrupting Lizzie:

Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!
Look at the beautiful bride, the spitan' image of Evangeline come back to life!⁴⁹¹

Lizzie is embarrassed and confused. As Abbie continues to goad her, emphasizing the fact that Margret will soon be married and out of the house, leaving her to rid herself of only one stepdaughter, Lizzie becomes furious and begins to fight back, proclaiming:

I was born in this house.
I will live in this house.
I will die in this house.⁴⁹²

Abbie sneers:

You're not like decent people
And I want you out of my house –
My house!⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁹ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 213. In the 1967 televised production of the opera, Lizzie makes her way over to the bed as she sings.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 239-240.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 240.

Their argument continues to escalate until Abbie, in a complete rage, “rips off frills from the gown, opening the front.”⁴⁹⁴ She threatens to tell Andrew “all about the hands” and heads up the stairs for her nap.⁴⁹⁵

Abbie’s words and actions here are particularly significant. When I spoke with Brenda Lewis about this scene, she pointed out that Abbie had caught Lizzie doing the unmentionable, certainly in terms of the year 1892, and daring even for the year 1965.⁴⁹⁶ If Abbie were to succeed in telling Andrew about how she had found Lizzie masturbating, Lizzie would no longer be allowed to live in her father’s house, and Lizzie was especially attached to that structure because she felt it was her duty to “keep watch” for her dead mother.⁴⁹⁷ In this way, Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie designed Abbie’s murder not to be as simple as Lizzie giving Abbie what she deserved, but rather, to argue that Lizzie had no choice but to resort to murder.

Additionally, Lewis recalled that when Faull sang the role of Abbie, the hatred that emanated from her person was absolutely overwhelming.⁴⁹⁸ She noted that she and Faull were colleagues and good friends; they were both from Pennsylvania and had attended the Curtis Institute of Music, singing together there and in churches throughout Philadelphia. Yet when Faull was her stepmother, Lewis remembered, she acted with unbelievable cruelty. Thus Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant (and Faull) succeeded in making Abbie so impossible that Lizzie (Lewis) was

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁹⁶ Lewis, interview with the author.

⁴⁹⁷ During her mad scene, Lizzie promises to “keep watch.”

⁴⁹⁸ Lewis, interview with the author.

more than ready to pick up her weapon by the end of Act III. Indeed, Plant wrote a letter to Elmslie on 23 October 1962, congratulating him on the following:

To my delight I found the dramatic line strengthened, and the characters more vivid. Abbie is a real fat bitch, with more brain than I had given her—which is all the better: my original plan was to have the audience identify with Lizzie’s loathing.⁴⁹⁹

Plant’s description of Abbie is telling and troubling. While the Act III scene between Lizzie and Abbie (which Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie referred to as the “Bitch Scene”), coupled with the “forbidden” ritual between Lizzie and Andrew in Act II, help to shape Lizzie as a victim of domestic violence and patriarchal oppression, Plant’s employment of a gender slur in reference to Abbie also implicates him in a contemporary system of patriarchal oppression.⁵⁰⁰

Lizzie Borden: Staging Anxieties About Women and Gender

Just two years after *Lizzie’s* premiere, feminist attorney Jo Freeman penned her “BITCH Manifesto,” seeking to reclaim the slur. According to Freeman:

A Bitch takes shit from no one. You may not like her, but you cannot ignore her . . . [Bitches] have loud voices and often use them . . . Bitches seek their identity strictly thru themselves and what they do. They are subjects, not objects . . . Often they do dominate other people when roles are not available to them which more creatively sublimate their energies and utilize their capabilities. More often they are accused of domineering when doing what would be considered natural by a man.⁵⁰¹

Turning away from Abbie to refocus on Lizzie, I will now consider the potential relevance of Freeman’s reclamation of “bitch” to my interpretation of *Lizzie Borden*. In certain respects,

⁴⁹⁹ Letter, Plant to Elmslie, 23 October 1962, Box 13, Folder 1, JBP.

⁵⁰⁰ It is important to note, however, that Plant was not alone in using the term “bitch,” even if his employment of it was the most offensive. In the “Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” Beeson described Abbie as “superficially pleasant but actually very bitchy.” Moreover, collectively, Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant referred to Lizzie and Abbie’s scene in Act III, Scene 1 as the “bitch scene.” See Beeson, “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 29, 33.

⁵⁰¹ Jo Freeman, “The BITCH Manifesto,” <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/bitch.htm> (accessed 2 May 2017). As Freeman explains on her website, “this paper was first published in *Notes from the Second Year*, ed. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, 1970. It was later reprinted as a pamphlet by KNOW, Inc., and reprinted in several books.”

Freeman's reclamation applies quite well to Lizzie, who eventually "takes shit from no one." Lizzie also "dominate[s] other people when roles are not available to [her]," and she might be "accused of domineering when doing what would be considered natural by a man." To be sure, we need not consider axe murdering to be "natural" behavior among men. However, during the 1890s, as well as the 1960s, the wielding of an axe was considered men's work. The real Lizzie Borden was acquitted in 1893, in part because women, and upper-class women in particular, were not assumed capable of such work or violence. Even today, the very label "axe murderer" is rarely thought to apply to women, thus my invocation of "murderess" throughout this chapter.

In a publicity performance and event prior to the NYCO's 1999 production of *Lizzie Borden*, director Rhoda Levine explained that the opera was "about what happens in a world where people cannot listen to the needs of others," noting that Lizzie in particular "is left in a world" where no one hears her needs, acknowledges them, or offers help.⁵⁰² Levine continued, suggesting that "if one is not listened to, much like Lucia or like the black community in *Malcolm X* . . . you often commit violence, because it's the only way you can in fact express yourself."⁵⁰³ Levine's comments in 1999 are very much in line with those she made regarding the 1996 Glimmerglass production of *Lizzie*, transferred to the NYCO three years later. In the Glimmerglass production notes, Levine's approach was summarized as follows:

⁵⁰² Rhoda Levine, speaking to moderator during a Works & Process performance series devoted to the NYCO's production of *Lizzie Borden*. This event took place and was recorded at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York, on 21 February 1999. See *Lizzie Borden: New Visions, Works & Process at the Guggenheim*, produced by Mary Sharp Cronson, DVD, The New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections - Dance, MGZIDVD 5-1114.

⁵⁰³ Levine was referring to the opera *X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X* by Anthony Davis and his cousin Thulani Davis. *X* premiered in a semi-staged production in Philadelphia in 1985 and received its first fully staged production at the NYCO in 1986.

This opera is about deprived people . . . not many choices . . . gets no response to her own needs, gives rise to murderous influences . . . re. Lizzie's descent into madness – communities who don't have choices descend into madness and violence.⁵⁰⁴

Levine's interpretation is certainly compelling, but I wish to challenge it. People who "don't have choices" sometimes rise up and take what they need, thereby creating their own opportunities. When we regard their actions as merely mad or violent, we risk re-inscribing their status as second-class citizens. In fact, Lizzie has the right to be a "bitch" in Freeman's terms, and we might read the opera as a process of her transformation to that identity. As I will demonstrate, however, the problem is that Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie took Lizzie's transformation a step too far.

By the end of the opera, the audience is more than ready for Lizzie's transformation to "bitch" (murderess), having been prepared not only by the mounting tension of the plot, but also through several musical and textual cues that have occurred throughout the opera. Notably, *Lizzie Borden* contains occasional references to Lizzie's gender and the limitations her gender poses. In Act II, while making fun of Lizzie's unmarried status, Andrew shouts: "You should have been born a man: then you could take what you want."⁵⁰⁵ This line is significant, demonstrating the course of action that is apparently unavailable to Lizzie. She is not supposed to just take what she wants, and when she finally does, she becomes a "bitch." Recalling Simone de Beauvoir's argument that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," we might also wonder if Lizzie really is a woman.⁵⁰⁶ Musically, Lizzie seems to struggle with this issue as well, particularly in the moments when she sings her father's music and thus, performs the "wrong" gender.

⁵⁰⁴ Production notes, Box 24, Folder 5, Rhoda Levine Papers (RLP), JPB 11-4, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

⁵⁰⁵ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 150-151.

⁵⁰⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 267.

During the argument between Lizzie and Andrew in Act I, Scene 1 (over Lizzie's desire to purchase a store-bought dress), Andrew bursts out:

Make it do,
Wear it out;
Use it up or do without!⁵⁰⁷

This becomes rather like a musical and verbal mantra, and Andrew repeats the injunction a few moments later, beginning a half step higher than before. Within the scene, Andrew's mantra is isolated both melodically and textually. The first measure is characterized by a descending half step, followed by a descending octave, a distinct melodic motion that catches the ear. Moreover, the first time Andrew sings his mantra, Beeson marks his entrance *pesante* and *fortissimo*, clearly setting Andrew's music apart from Lizzie's music, which Andrew interrupts. The second time, Andrew comes in after a fermata and as Beeson marks, with "slightly more motion." In both instances, Andrew's mantra is concluded by an orchestral flourish, positioning his music away from what follows (Examples 2.5 and 2.6).

⁵⁰⁷ Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant, *Lizzie Borden*, 34-35. Lizzie recalls Andrew's mantra in Act III. See *Lizzie Borden*, 253.

Example 2.5

Andrew's mantra (first time)

Pesante
ff

Andrew

Make it do, Wear it out;

molto
f
mf subito
sfz
sfz
mp
sfz
mp

Andrew

Use it up or Do with - out!

f
f
sfz

Example 2.6

Andrew's mantra (second time)

$\text{♩} = 80$
Slightly more motion

Andrew

with weight Make it do, Wear it out;

ff
subito
mf
f
piu p
subito
with pedal

Andrew

Use it up or Do with - out!

f
f
ff
f cresc.
Ped.

The melodic distinction of Andrew's mantra is important because when Lizzie sings a bit of Andrew's melody in the following scene, one is likely to recognize it. As Margret worries about what will happen when Captain MacFarlane approaches her father, she explains:

I'm afraid;
Father will mock him, and hurt him:
He will *not* listen to him!⁵⁰⁸

Lizzie tries to reassure Margret, who remains unconvinced, responding:

What if they quarrel and fight.
Jason will leave.⁵⁰⁹

At this, Lizzie bursts out:

Let them quarrel!
Let them fight!⁵¹⁰

Melodically, her injunction recalls the first two lines of Andrew's mantra. At Beeson's indication of "pushing forward," Lizzie begins by descending by half step and then by major seventh (thus an octave away from her opening pitch). Lizzie's second phrase – ascending by half step and then by a minor seventh – is identical to her father's second phrase (Example 2.7). Margret then begs Lizzie: "Can't we wait until some other time..."⁵¹¹ Lizzie begins to lecture Margret and then returns to her (father's) mantra. This one, like Andrew's first iteration, is set off from the preceding music by Beeson's indications of *più pesante* and *fortissimo* (Example 2.8). Thus Lizzie takes over her father's music. Importantly, she does this as she dictates Margret's life to her. Lizzie may have the

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 59.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 59. Later, in Act II, Andrew sings a similar line to the exact same melody: "Let them listen! Let them wait!" See *Lizzie Borden*, 107.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 60.

best of intentions, given that she seeks to engineer her sister's escape yet she starts to resemble her authoritarian father in the process, as though foreshadowing the opera's conclusion.

Example 2.7

Lizzie's mantra (first time)

pushing forward

Lizzie

Let them quar-rel! Let them fight! (t)

p sub. *f* *R.H.* *L.H.* *R.H.*

Example 2.8

Lizzie's mantra (second time)

$\text{♩} = 132$ **più pesante**

Lizzie

Let them quar - rel! Let them fight!

ff *sfz p* *f* *mp* *ff*

Another significant transformation for Lizzie occurs through the word “forbidden.” After the Act II ritual between Andrew and Lizzie, during which Andrew forbids Lizzie from seeing the preacher, the children’s choir, and Captain MacFarlane, Lizzie continues the ritual in her head.

Andrew heads up the stairs to join Abbie in their bedroom, and Lizzie continues to ask:

What am I forbidden?
What else am I forbidden?
What else, what else, what else?⁵¹²

The forbidden ritual comes back to haunt Lizzie and her parents later in the opera. When Abbie catches Lizzie masturbating in Act III, Lizzie is incredulous:

Forbidden
You have no right...
Our room is forbidden to you.⁵¹³

Abbie's response is incredibly telling:

Forbidden this, forbidden that!
Point A, Point B!
Can't ever tell your voices apart
When you and Andrew have a set to.
God should have made you the banker.⁵¹⁴

Even Abbie realizes the extent to which Andrew and Lizzie have come to resemble each other.

Abbie also seems to suggest that Lizzie would be better suited to some sort of "men's work."

Lizzie seizes an opportunity later on in Act III as she charges up the stairs and murders Abbie. When Andrew comes home and calls up the stairs for Abbie, Lizzie appears instead, explaining:

Margret has gone away.
And Abbie has left us to ourselves.
Mother would be pleased.⁵¹⁵

Andrew tries to push past Lizzie on the stairs. Seeing the blood on Lizzie's dress, he begins to cry out Abbie's name. Lizzie responds ferociously:

⁵¹² Ibid., 159.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 216-217.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 217-218.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 269.

Abbie is forbidden!
 Must not see her ever again!⁵¹⁶

Here, Lizzie's melody recalls the very melody her father sang to her during their Act II ritual. This time, however, Lizzie does the forbidding; Andrew is no longer the one in charge, musically or physically (Examples 2.9, 2.10, and 2.11).

Example 2.9

Lizzie's forbidden

Lizzie

Must not see her ev - er a - gain!

Example 2.10

Andrew's forbidden (first time)

Andrew

Must not come here ev - er - a - gain.

Example 2.11

Andrew's forbidden (second time)

Andrew

Must not see them ev - er a - gain.

The enormity of Lizzie's transformation becomes clear in the final scene of the opera. This scene opens with Lizzie singing in a detached, emotionless recitative as she counts “up the columns

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 271.

and add[s] up the numbers,” just like her father in Act I (Examples 2.12 and 2.13).⁵¹⁷ As Beeson noted in 1999, Lizzie is the “spitting image” of her father at the end of the opera.⁵¹⁸ Thus she has transformed into something more than a “bitch”; she has actually become a man – but not just any man – she has become her father. What does this mean? After all the work that Lizzie has done to emancipate herself, is she even free? At first glance, *Lizzie Borden* looks like a progressive opera. It is a work that seemingly encourages its heroine to smash the patriarchy once and for all, to be a “bitch” and be proud of it. Yet upon closer examination, *Lizzie Borden* may be a work that recasts its heroine as the patriarchy. Particularly after her mad scene, Lizzie remolds herself in the shape of her authoritarian father; suddenly, the opera no longer appears so revolutionary.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 276.

⁵¹⁸ Beeson, speaking at the Works & Process performance series devoted to the NYCO’s production of *Lizzie*. See *Lizzie Borden: New Visions*.

Example 2.12

Andrew counting in Act I

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a scene where Andrew counts. Each system includes a vocal line for Andrew and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 6/4. The first system shows Andrew's vocal line with lyrics: "Sev-en hun-dred and four, sev-en hun-dred and five..." followed by "It should be eight." The piano accompaniment features a steady bass line with triplets and pairs of notes, and a treble line with chords and melodic fragments. The second system shows Andrew's vocal line with lyrics: "Sev-en hun-dred and four, sev-en hun-dred and five..." The piano accompaniment continues with a similar bass line and a treble line that includes a *p* *crescendo* marking and a *poco f* marking. Pedal markings (*Ped.*) are present in both systems.

Example 2.13

Lizzie counting in Act III

Very slightly slower
♩. = ♩ = 46c

Lizzie ...four hun - dred and four, four hun - dred and five...
clocks strike six:

Lizzie ...four hun - dred and eight, four hun - dred and nine... e - lev - en...

Lizzie ...four hun - dred and twelve, thir - teen, four - teen.

At this point, a return to Plant and to the theory of survivor guilt is useful. One of the governing tenets of survivor guilt is that survivors feel guilty because over the course of their trauma, they have begun to identify with their oppressors. In *Night*, for example, Elie Wiesel recalled how he felt when he witnessed his father being beaten in front of him at Buna:

I had watched the whole scene without moving. I kept quiet. In fact I was thinking of how to get farther away so that I would not be hit myself. What is more, any anger I felt at that moment was directed, not against the Kapo, but against my father. I was angry with him, for not knowing how to avoid Idek's outbreak. That is what concentration camp life had made of me.⁵¹⁹

If we view *Lizzie Borden* as an artistic document that exposes Plant's struggle with survivor guilt, the opera's conclusion makes sense. Over the course of the opera, Lizzie identifies more and more with her father, even as she despises him. In the end, she becomes him.

It is impossible, however, to view *Lizzie* solely through Plant's experience. Beeson and Elmslie made their mark on the opera as well, and here, it is worth interrogating the fact that these three men were theorizing why a woman would commit murder during the early days of the modern feminist movement. In 1963, two years before *Lizzie's* premiere, Betty Friedan published her landmark manifesto *The Feminine Mystique*, in which her main goal was to uncover and explicate the deeply rooted "problem that has no name" that plagued so many American women.⁵²⁰ Friedan was speaking about the widespread unhappiness among women, particularly housewives, in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s.⁵²¹ We might view Lizzie as suffering from a version of the "problem that has no name" as well. She is supposed to be content inside her father's house. Instead, she feels imprisoned.

Friedan also challenged much of the supposedly "psychological" analysis of women that became popular in the United States after World War II. Yet in a certain sense, this was precisely the kind of analysis in which Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie engaged as they sought to create a woman

⁵¹⁹ Wiesel, *Night*, 61.

⁵²⁰ See Betty Friedan, "The Problem That Has No Name," in *The Feminine Mystique, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition*, Introduction by Gail Collins, Afterword by Anna Quindlen (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), 1-22.

⁵²¹ For further context, see Carol A. B. Warren's study of women, marriage, and mental hospitalization in the 1950s: *Madwives: Schizophrenic Women in the 1950s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

struggling with domestic discontent, along with some sort of psychosexual complex that would finally drive her over the edge.⁵²² Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie thus contributed to the culture surrounding and fueling the modern feminist movement. Indeed, women who were unsatisfied were not necessarily crazy. Moreover, they were not necessarily trying to become like men. In Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All*, the heroine Susan B. Anthony pointedly warned that women, once enfranchised, should not "become like men."⁵²³ Thus what Lizzie Borden, the historical figure and the operatic heroine perhaps needed most was simply the right to her own existence *as a woman*, however unconventional in its time(s).

By taking control of her situation and becoming a "bitch," Lizzie Andrew Borden sought that existence. Thus a more fitting conclusion to the opera might have been the more historically accurate one. Immediately after her acquittal in real life, Lizzie and her sister Emma moved out of their father's house, carving out a new space for their lives. In 1999, when asked to describe the operatic Lizzie, Phyllis Pancella offered this portrait:

Repressed . . . very frustrated, very stuck. She's a woman in her early thirties without a husband in a very unpleasant household, and there is nothing a woman in her early thirties in the 1890s without a husband could do but stay in said household, no matter what the conditions were . . . And so she stayed, and that's where she was gonna have to stay . . . The first thing she did after she was acquitted was get out of that house."⁵²⁴

⁵²² Friedan, "The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud" in *The Feminine Mystique*, 110-138. In the booklet that accompanies the re-mastered to DVD version of *Lizzie Borden*, the final scene involving Lizzie and Andrew is titled "Seduction Scene," as if to suggest Lizzie's attraction to her father.

⁵²³ See Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein, *The Mother of Us All, Together with the Scenario by Maurice Grosser, Piano-Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1947), 120-121.

⁵²⁴ Pancella, speaking at the 1999 Works & Process performance series devoted to *Lizzie Borden*. See *Lizzie Borden: New Visions*. Pancella spoke about Lizzie to me in similar terms, describing her as "stuck, very stuck." Pancella, interview with the author.

Once again, the concept of the spinster is refracted through our contemporary culture. What I would like to draw attention to, however, is Pancella's final point. Transitioning seamlessly from the operatic Lizzie back to the historical Lizzie, Pancella reveals the fault lines of Beeson, Elmslie, and Plant's creation.⁵²⁵ The real Lizzie Borden did not become her father. She became her own woman with her own activities and interests. She gave time and money, for example, to the Animal Rescue League of Fall River, and she threw lavish parties at her new home, entertaining guests from New York City in a fashion that would have been impossible in her previous life.⁵²⁶ Thus the real Lizzie escaped, only to be re-imprisoned by Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie in 1965.

As Susan McClary points out, "it is important to keep in mind that the analytical devices for taming the monstrous in music are brought to bear not on actual madwomen—or even on the products of madwomen."⁵²⁷ Instead she argues: "They are marshaled to ward off the boogey-men constructed by the same people who also construct the frames and then stand in horror of their own inventions, rather like Dr. Frankenstein and his creature."⁵²⁸ Operatic madwomen are "first and foremost male fantasies of transgression dressed up as women," according to McClary; in other words:

⁵²⁵ Interestingly, Pancella told me that one of the major challenges she faced in preparing the role of Lizzie was "letting go of wanting it to be historical." She continued: "I had to stop, because that's just not the piece. The piece is really more of Elektra, using Lizzie." Yet Pancella's comments in 1999 demonstrate just how hard it is to let go of the real Lizzie Borden. Pancella, interview with the author.

⁵²⁶ In fact, the Animal Rescue League in Fall River continues to benefit from the money Lizzie Borden left in her will. See William Hegeman, "Lizzie Borden, Animal Lover," *Chicago Tribune*, 30 September 2014, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/pets/ct-pets-lizzie-0930-20141001-story.html> (accessed 2 May 2017).

⁵²⁷ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 109.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

Real women—mad or otherwise—do not enter into this picture at all. We sit on the sidelines and watch as mainstream culture concocts such figures, then envies, desires, fears, and finally demolishes and/or analyzes them.”⁵²⁹

With this framework in mind, it is worth noting that Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie’s Lizzie appears almost as a reincarnation of psychiatrist Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing’s “Mannish Lesbian,” first so-coined during the 1880s.⁵³⁰ As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes, “Krafft-Ebing’s lesbians seemed to desire male privileges and power as ardently as, perhaps more ardently than, they sexually desired women”; to put it another way, the Mannish Lesbian was a “male soul trapped in a female body” and thus “a freak of nature, a logical impossibility.”⁵³¹

Brenda Lewis’s *Lizzie Borden*

Yet *Lizzie Borden* afforded at least one “real” woman – Brenda Lewis – a possibility and an opportunity for escape. Beeson settled on Lewis for the title role because he wanted someone with acting experience.⁵³² Lewis had made a name for herself on the Broadway stage in Benjamin Britten’s *The Rape of Lucretia* (1948), Marc Blitzstein’s *Regina* (1949), and Sigmund Romberg’s *The Girl in Pink Tights* (1954), as well as in the opera house and was thus an ideal candidate for the role. When I interviewed Lewis in 2016, she recalled:

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁵³⁰ Krafft-Ebing was an Austro-German psychiatrist best known for his work *Psychopathia Sexualis*. See *Psychopathia Sexualis, With Special Reference to Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, translated by F.J. Rebman (New York: Rebman, 1904). According to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, he was “the leading spokesman for sexology in nineteenth-century Europe.” Krafft-Ebing defined sexology “as the study of ‘abnormal’ and ‘perverse’ sexual practices, which did not involve a primary interest in reproductive intercourse . . . Predominantly among these perversions, Krafft-Ebing listed homosexuality.” See Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne,” 287.

⁵³¹ Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne,” 287.

⁵³² Beeson explained how “a mezzo-soprano was needed for the title role; more importantly, a phenomenal actress was required. I nominated several mezzos; Rudel nominated a phenomenal actress, Brenda Lewis, who, though a soprano, had sung such roles as Carmen and Marc Blitzstein’s Regina.” See “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 40.

It was an experience for me . . . thank God I had it at the time. I was going through the framework of a particularly unpleasant divorce. And at that time my daughter was four or five . . . it was a very terrible time for me. I wasn't living in my own home. She and I were in a rented bedroom . . . it was a very terrible time for me. And then I had this to go to every day – it was like having a cave to hide in . . . In a sense, it saved my sanity that I had *Lizzie* to work on.⁵³³

When I spoke with conductor Anton Coppola, he remembered that Lewis impressed him because she was always so professional and so well prepared, a testament to the extent to which Lewis threw herself into her work.⁵³⁴ Coppola noted that Beeson's score was extremely difficult. Lewis was likely able to lose herself in the sheer mechanics of learning the new role. Yet she apparently did not lose herself or her perspective entirely.

During our conversation, Lewis and I eventually got around to the topic of the 1950s and to the coalescing of the women's liberation movement during the 1960s. When I asked Lewis if as she was working on *Lizzie*, she drew parallels between Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie's repressed, Victorian-era spinster and some of the frustration experienced by women during the 1950s, as documented by Friedan, she responded: "How could you not?"⁵³⁵ She continued:

I am sure that there are still husband and wife relationships with the same dynamic. We're not completely liberated, but we're getting there. And don't accept less. It has to be fifty-fifty.⁵³⁶

With pride, she concluded by describing her daughter's recent marriage:

My daughter waited until she was fifty-five to get married. And he's absolutely [pause] it's hand in glove, and I consider him my son [pause]. He fits in the family; he fits in the relationship with her; all of that is important. So it is possible!⁵³⁷

⁵³³ Lewis, interview with the author.

⁵³⁴ Anton Coppola, interview with the author, New York, New York, 4 March 2016.

⁵³⁵ Lewis, interview with the author.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*

Lewis's recollections and experience suggest that however imperfect Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie's characterizations of Lizzie, Abbie, Andrew, and even Margret were, they still succeeded, at least in Lewis's mind, in offering a commentary on the anxieties surrounding family and gender roles – during the 1890s, the 1960s, and even in the early twenty-first century.

Lizzie Borden's Reception, Influence, and Future

Although *Lizzie Borden's* 1965 premiere by the NYCO was not nearly as impactful as *The Consul's* eight-month long opening run at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway, the opera remains an important and moderately successful work. The premiere, for example, was generally well received. On 26 March 1965, music critic Howard Klein described Beeson's music as "modern and eclectic."⁵³⁸ He was not sure that the music had much of a "clear personality" but he found the drama quite compelling on the whole, and he encouraged readers to attend the second performance on 4 April, concluding that the opera was "well worth investigating."⁵³⁹ The NYCO revived *Lizzie* in 1967, the same year that the televised production, filmed in Boston back in December 1965, was first broadcast on National Educational Television (NET).⁵⁴⁰ Theodore Strongin reviewed the NYCO's 1967 revival and despite voicing misgivings similar to those provided by Klein two years prior, declared *Lizzie Borden* "thoroughly absorbing and enjoyable, and

⁵³⁸ Howard Klein, "World Premiere of 'Lizzie Borden': Jack Beeson Opera Staged by City Center Troupe," *New York Times*, 26 March 1965.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ National Educational Television (NET) was the precursor to Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

a real success.”⁵⁴¹ In 1976 and 1999, the NYCO returned yet again to *Lizzie*; thus the opera’s performance statistics prove more than respectable, particularly for an American opera.

In his memoir, NYCO General Director Julius Rudel counted *Lizzie*, along with Robert Ward’s *The Crucible*, among the two “most successful new American operas to grace our stage.”⁵⁴²

Due in large part to funding from the Ford Foundation, the NYCO’s 1965 season was devoted entirely to twentieth-century operas.⁵⁴³ The Ford Foundation had previously helped to sponsor three all-American opera seasons, and at the end of his life, Rudel remained deeply proud of the fruits of these collaborations, boasting:

The American seasons, followed by the seasons of twentieth-century operas, accomplished what I hoped. The works represented were of varying quality, but all of them kept the audience interested . . . Our seasons of new and unusual fare paved the way for regional companies to begin to explore twentieth-century American works.⁵⁴⁴

While *Lizzie Borden* has not yet made many inroads with regional or collegiate opera companies, that could change. When the Boston Lyric Opera revived *Lizzie* in 2013, they did so in a chamber production. Miranda Beeson explained that she was initially very skeptical about the BLO’s

⁵⁴¹ Theodore Strongin, “Curious Paradox of ‘Lizzie Borden’: The Opera Proves Winning Despite Obvious Faults,” *New York Times*, 27 October 1967.

⁵⁴² See Julius Rudel and Rebecca Paller, *First and Lasting Impressions: Julius Rudel Looks Back on a Life in Music* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 80.

⁵⁴³ The Ford Foundation gave the NYCO \$250,000.00 for the all twentieth-century opera season in the spring of 1965, during which the NYCO performed the following works: Shostakovich’s *Katerina Ismailova*, Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, Douglas Moore’s *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, Weill’s *Die Dreigroschenoper*, Britten’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Menotti’s *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, Puccini’s *Il Trittico*, Beeson’s *Lizzie Borden*, Carlisle Floyd’s *Susannah*, Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*, and Orff’s *Carmina Burana*. On nomination of the NYCO, Beeson received a commission for *Lizzie* from the Ford Foundation in August 1964. See Beeson’s *Registry, 1956-2010* (also called the “Latouche Book”), p. 54, Folder 11, Box 25, JBP. By August 1964, *Lizzie Borden* was essentially complete, save for the orchestral prelude/interlude and the last scene. As Beeson explained, he decided “not to write the interlude/prelude and the last scene” until he had secured the Ford Foundation commission, about which he had been pestering Rudel for some time. See “The Autobiography of *Lizzie Borden*,” 40.

⁵⁴⁴ Rudel and Paller, *First and Lasting Impressions*, 85.

“reduced” version.⁵⁴⁵ But when the BLO came to her with their proposal, essentially a very trimmed version of the opera, she became convinced that it could work.⁵⁴⁶ Ultimately, John Conklin and Todd Bayshore condensed the opera’s three acts into seven scenes, using Bayshore’s revised score for chamber ensemble.⁵⁴⁷ The BLO’s chamber version could help to bring *Lizzie* back into the repertoire of smaller companies, for it makes the opera far less formidable from a performance and production standpoint.

In 2016, Brenda Lewis described the process of thinking back on her years as Lizzie as an act of reaching into the “attic” of her memory.⁵⁴⁸ Following in that same vein, we too might approach *Lizzie Borden* as a corner in the attic of our collective memory, one that we scrutinize, contest, and hopefully, improve upon as we look toward the future. *Lizzie Borden* ultimately remains haunted by patriarchal oppression because in the operatic world they created, Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie, like Menotti before them, relied on the tried and true convention of the mad scene, a convention long used to explain the behaviors of women who act out or resist authority. *Lizzie Borden* also represents an uneasy convergence of past and present. On one level, the operatic Lizzie stands as a surrogate for someone struggling with survivor guilt. For Plant, it appears the struggle was never complete, let alone won. Plant may have “become an American,” but that

⁵⁴⁵ Miranda Beeson, interview with the author, New York, New York, 9 February 2016.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. Miranda Beeson explained that ultimately, the 2013 chamber version of *Lizzie* was a three-way partnership between the BLO, Boosey and Hawkes (the publisher), and the Estate of Jack Beeson. She maintained that Boosey was very kind, giving her the final say about all the cuts.

⁵⁴⁷ John Conklin, the BLO’s artistic advisor, worked on the dramatic revision, while Bayshore handled the orchestration. See Harlow Robinson, “BLO’s ‘Lizzie Borden’ Condenses the Tale, Not the Trauma,” *Boston Globe*, 17 November 2013, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/music/2013/11/17/blo-opera-annex-present-jack-beeson-lizzie-borden/qCW3YY0GmjFj3EfHJWv5J/story.html> (accessed 2 May 2017).

⁵⁴⁸ Lewis, interview with the author.

transformation was not enough to free him from his past. As such perhaps, neither could Lizzie's transformation free her. On another level, and for Beeson and Elmslie in particular, the operatic Lizzie appears as a supposed surrogate for American women. Throughout the country, women were rebelling against a patriarchal system, and some men responded by seeking to contain and/or explain their resistance. Collectively, Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie accepted that Lizzie was guilty of murder, set about revealing just what had driven her to commit her crimes, and then concluded that through these crimes, Lizzie had somehow become less of a woman. Indeed, at the end of the opera, Lizzie impersonates a man. *Lizzie Borden's* history and legacy is thus incredibly messy, spotlighting a complicated collision of quickly shifting national and feminist identities in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s and demonstrating yet again the problems inherent in men commandeering women's bodies and voices to reflect national mythologies.

CHAPTER 3

A Siren's *Odyssey*: Listening to Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*:

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who has heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!
Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁹ Margaret Atwood, "Siren Song," in *Selected Poems, 1965–1975* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), 195–196.

First published in 1976, Margaret Atwood's *Selected Poems, 1965-1975* includes ten "Songs of the Transformed."⁵⁵⁰ The seventh of these is the "Siren Song," a poem that represents Atwood's attempt to reclaim the song of the siren and imbue it with feminist agency.⁵⁵¹ Sirens are perhaps most famous for their appearance in *The Odyssey*, Homer's chronicle of Odysseus's long journey home to Ithaca after the fall of Troy. As Odysseus and his men prepare to sail past the Island of the Sirens, Odysseus, following the witch-goddess Circe's advice, orders his men to plug their ears with beeswax. Meanwhile, his men tie him to the mast of the ship so that he may listen to the siren song without endangering himself. According to Homer, sirens are conniving creatures who sing enchanting songs to lure sailors to shipwreck in treacherous, rocky waters, and readers of *The Odyssey* are thus likely to sympathize with Odysseus as he tells of his struggle:

I listened to the sweet song that the Sirens sang and my heart filled with an ache to hear everything they had to offer (for that is the secret of the Sirens' song, you see: what each man wants most to hear) and I strained at the ropes holding me tightly to the mast and begged the men to free me. But they ignored my words...⁵⁵²

What if we too are willing to ignore Odysseus's words? What if we are willing to listen to the siren song? And what if we are willing to listen, not because we desire her secret for our own purposes, but rather, because we are genuinely interested in her perspective?

⁵⁵⁰ Atwood, *Selected Poems*, 188-200.

⁵⁵¹ In 2005, Atwood took on a similar project, offering a retelling of *The Odyssey* from the perspective of Odysseus's wife Penelope. See *The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005). Historically, sirens have been understood to be female, and as musicologists Inna Naroditskaya and Linda Austern point out, "until the twentieth century, when women reclaimed her image in unprecedented numbers, the artists who accomplished her transmission from the oral to the written realm were, for the most part, men." See "Introduction: Singing Each to Each" in *Music of the Sirens*, edited by Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 8.

⁵⁵² R.L. Eickhoff, *The Odyssey: A Modern Translation of Homer's Classic Tale* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, LLC, 2001), 218.

There is a siren song at the end of Carlisle Floyd's 1955 opera *Susannah*. It is not "high and clear" like the one Odysseus describes in *The Odyssey*.⁵⁵³ Instead, it is rather low and gravelly, yet it is still a siren song, bewitching, ruinous, and highly significant. We can use this siren song to talk about rape and about resistance, not only in this opera but in our own world as well.

Unfortunately, rape continues to be misunderstood, disbelieved, and ignored in the twenty-first century, and thus although Floyd's opera premiered more than sixty years ago, the issues it brought to the stage remain vitally relevant. As the third-most performed American opera in the United States, a favorite among professional companies and college and conservatory opera programs alike, *Susannah* is a compelling vehicle for addressing such issues.⁵⁵⁴ In fact, *Susannah*'s regular presence on college campuses is all the more intriguing because the opera deals with issues that are prevalent at colleges throughout the country. *Susannah* includes rape, denial, slut shaming, and victim blaming, but most importantly, it concludes with resistance. Drawing on materials preserved in the Carlisle Floyd Papers at the South Caroliniana Library, the Special Collections at Florida State University (FSU), and on oral testimony, I analyze the gender and sexual politics that have informed *Susannah*'s performance and reception since the 1950s, and I suggest a reading of the opera and its production history as a kind of *Odyssey*, not from the usual perspective of the hero Odysseus but instead, from the perspective of the heroine *Susannah*.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 218.

⁵⁵⁴ According to the most recent performance statistics (2009) provided by the service Opera America, *Susannah* is the third most-performed American opera in the United States and Canada, trailing behind only Gian-Carlo Menotti's one-act Christmas favorite *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951) and George Gershwin's perennially popular *Porgy and Bess* (1935). See North American Works Directory, Opera America <http://www.operaamerica.org/applications/NAWD/index.aspx> (accessed 29 April 2017). See Tables 3.1 and 3.2 (at the end of this document) for a representative listing of professional and college productions of *Susannah*.

Whereas previous discussions of *Susannah* have tended to focus on the opera's relationship to McCarthyism, I employ my own musical and textual analyses and my interviews with American sopranos and with the opera's composer to show how *Susannah*'s title heroine may offer a model for explicitly feminist resistance.⁵⁵⁵ As recently as September 2014, the San Francisco Opera mounted a new production of *Susannah*, starring soprano Patricia Racette. Prior to the production's opening, Racette recalled that she had first sung the title role while in college. "Susannah is the only role I've ever paid to sing," she declared dramatically in an interview with *Opera News*.⁵⁵⁶ She explained:

I was a sophomore at the University of North Texas when I heard they were doing *Susannah* at a small college in Fort Worth—and I was in Denton, about an hour north. I wanted to do it, but I was told that in order to participate, I had to register at this other college—even though I was going to school full-time in Denton. So I paid to join a class so that I could sing *Susannah*.⁵⁵⁷

Racette's words offer a glimpse into the way in which this role and notably, its music, have appealed to an impressive line of American sopranos since Phyllis Curtin, the very first *Susannah*. Along with Racette, sopranos such as Renée Fleming, Cheryl Studer, Patricia Craig, Maralin

⁵⁵⁵ In 2013, Floyd's biographer Thomas Holliday wrote about *Susannah* within the context of McCarthyism, particularly as it manifested itself in Florida during the 1950s and 1960s. See *Falling Up: The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd, The Authorized Biography, With a Foreword by Plácido Domingo* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 116–120. Somewhat similarly, in 2008, Rachel Hutchins-Viroux offered a compare and contrast analysis of *Susannah* and Robert Ward's 1961 operatic adaptation of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, thus advancing the McCarthy connection. See "Witch-hunts, Theocracies and Hypocrisy: McCarthyism in Arthur Miller/Robert Ward's Opera *The Crucible* and Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," *Revue LISA E-Journal* 6, no. 2 (2008): 140-148. In 2012, Helen Smith analyzed Floyd's construction of community in *Susannah*, emphasizing the importance of the chorus. See "Faith and Love in New Hope Valley: A Consideration of Community in Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," *American Music Research Center Journal* 21 (2012): 67–91. Elise K. Kirk also wrote about *Susannah* at some length in her 2001 survey. See *American Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 286–291.

⁵⁵⁶ Patricia Racette, quoted in F. Paul Driscoll, "All American: Patricia Racette," *Opera News*, September 2014, p. 22.

⁵⁵⁷ Racette, quoted in *ibid.*, 22.

Niska, Karen Armstrong, Sharon Daniels, and Nancy Gustavson have taken custody of the defiant woman, falsely accused.⁵⁵⁸

Sopranos have identified something special in the role of Susannah. Unlike many of the tragic heroines of nineteenth-century European opera, Susannah does not submit at the opera's conclusion. As soprano Phyllis Treigle put it in an email to me, "Susannah lives at the end of the opera!"⁵⁵⁹ Indeed, *Susannah* departs from the familiar operatic trope of the persecuted soprano, victimized and finally destroyed by a patriarchal plot. Fighting back in both body and voice, she survives slander and rape; she is a heroine who refuses to be silenced, providing something of an empowering alternative to Catherine Clément's operatic woman undone. When Susannah stands at the opera's conclusion, a hardened woman in the doorway of a rustic cabin, she pioneers for her right to persevere. As she speaks, sings, and lives, she unsettles the opera's conclusion, obliging her audience to consider uncomfortable questions about the nature of opera, rape, and survival. *Susannah* is best known for the title heroine's two stunning arias: "Ain't it a pretty night" and "The trees on the mountain," both of which continue to be beloved recital pieces in the United States. In this chapter, however, I highlight the significance of Susannah's final utterance, "Come on over, Little Bat." Far too short to be considered a free-standing aria, this, I argue, is Susannah's siren song. By attending to this number, we can move beyond the narrative of *Susannah* as a simple American folk opera, a national achievement, and towards a more nuanced view, one that allows us to see how *Susannah* also critiques our continual reliance on national narratives.

⁵⁵⁸ Other sopranos have recorded Susannah's arias. See Dawn Upshaw, *The World So Wide*, © 1998 by Nonesuch, Nonesuch 79458, compact disc; Elizabeth Futral, *Great Operatic Arias* © 2003 by Chandos, Chandos 3096, compact disc.

⁵⁵⁹ Phyllis Treigle, email correspondence with the author, 19 March 2015.

Beginnings

Susannah's story begins in Tallahassee, Florida, in the spring of 1953. According to Floyd (b. 1926), who was working at the time as a member of the FSU piano faculty, *Susannah* was the result of a conversation between himself and Nathan Samuel Blount, who was then a graduate student in English at the university.⁵⁶⁰ Blount apparently asked Floyd if he knew the Apocryphal tale of Susanna and the Elders.⁵⁶¹ The son of a Methodist circuit minister, Floyd was certainly familiar with the rough outlines of the story.⁵⁶² The tale goes as follows: The two elders of the people of Babylon have begun to lust after Susanna, the beautiful and faithful wife of Joakim, who is a wealthy and respected member of the community.⁵⁶³ Having taken to spying on Susanna for some time, the elders decide to approach her one day as she bathes in her husband's garden. They threaten to accuse her of adultery unless she agrees to have sex with them. Susanna refuses and is later arrested. She is about to be put to death but is saved when the prophet Daniel speaks on her behalf, insisting that her accusers be questioned before she is pronounced guilty. Daniel then interrogates the elders separately, and when discrepancies emerge in their stories, Susanna is acquitted and the elders put to death.

⁵⁶⁰ Carlisle Floyd, interview with the author, Tallahassee, Florida, 19 May 2015. See also Holliday, *Falling Up*, 117. Nathan Samuel Blount eventually earned his PhD in English at FSU, going on to become an English professor at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He died in 1989. See Memorial Resolution for Nathan Samuel Blount, http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~flswphs/Tom_Stewart/blount.htm (accessed 26 April 2016).

⁵⁶¹ In the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, "Susanna" appears as Chapter 13 in the Book of Daniel. In Protestant churches (and this includes Floyd's background and tradition), "Susanna" is one of the additions to the Book of Daniel, considered Apocryphal. Interestingly, the King James Version of the Bible, preferred by some Protestants, does include the story of King David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel, Chapter 11) in which King David gazes on Bathsheba as she bathes, sleeps with her, and impregnates her.

⁵⁶² Floyd's father, Carlisle Sessions Floyd, completed his education and ordainment as a Methodist minister at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. See Holliday, *Falling Up*, 11.

⁵⁶³ See Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978), 19-20; 315-317.

When I interviewed Floyd in 2015, he recalled, as he had in many prior interviews with others, how in 1953 he immediately perceived the tale’s “dramatic potential,” explaining how “everything seemed to gel . . . very quickly.”⁵⁶⁴ Yet in terms of collaboration, Floyd and Blount did not exactly “gel,” and when Blount failed to produce a libretto in a timely manner, the composer took matters into his own hands, writing first the text and then the music. Floyd, however, was no novice when it came to writing libretti, as he had written both the music and the text for his first two operas, *Slow Dusk* (1949) and *The Fugitives* (1951, retracted).⁵⁶⁵ Floyd was also aware of Menotti’s habit and success in supplying his own libretti. In fact, Floyd admitted that he may have been inspired by Menotti both in terms of his decision to write his own libretto for *Susannah* and in the designation he used. Floyd labeled *Susannah* a “musical drama,” recalling that he likely “went the way of Menotti” to avoid “some of the stigma” that accompanied the word “opera” during the 1950s.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶⁴ Floyd, interview with the author.

⁵⁶⁵ Floyd composed *Slow Dusk* while working on his master’s degree (in piano performance) at Syracuse University. *Slow Dusk* premiered at Syracuse’s Crouse College Auditorium on 2 May 1949. According to Holliday, Jack Beeson informed Floyd that the Opera Workshop at Columbia University did an in-house production of *Slow Dusk* within a year of the opera’s premiere. See *Falling Up*, 98. Floyd composed *The Fugitives* (now retracted) after joining the FSU piano faculty. *The Fugitives* premiered at FSU on 17 April 1951. It is interesting to note that Floyd also had a background in creative writing, having contributed several short stories and prose pieces to student publications while working toward his bachelor’s degree in music. Some of these writings may be found in Floyd’s archival collection in South Carolina. For example, see Carlisle Floyd, “Which Shall Not Perish From the Earth” in *We, the Freshman* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1943): 2-3; “Low-Country Town” in *We, the Freshman* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1944): 2-5; “Tschaikowsky’s Sixth’ (A Sketch)” and “The ‘Pounding’” in *The Concept* XLIII, no. 4 (May 1944): 21, 24-25, 37-38, in “Writings” Folder, Box 1, Carlisle Floyd Papers (CFP), South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. The “Writings” folder includes a number of loose-leaf manuscripts as well.

⁵⁶⁶ Floyd, interview with the author. Floyd labeled his first opera, *Slow Dusk*, “a music play in one act.” He has used the designation “musical drama” for most of his large-scale operas. These include *Susannah* (1955), *Wuthering Heights* (1958), *The Passion of Jonathan Wade* (1962, revised 1990), and *Of Mice and Men* (1970). Both *Bilby’s Doll* (1976) and *Willie Stark* (1981) are designated operas in three acts. *Cold Sassy Tree* (2000) is a “musical play in three acts” but is also commonly referred to as Floyd’s first “comic opera.” I document Menotti’s preference for the term “musical drama” in Chapter 1.

According to music critic Ronald Eyer, Floyd wrote the libretto for *Susannah* “in the remarkably short period of ten days.”⁵⁶⁷ He envisioned the protagonist as eighteen-year-old Susannah Polk, who lives not with her husband but with her older brother Sam in an isolated Tennessee mountain community, ironically called New Hope Valley. From the beginning, Susannah and Sam are something of outsiders; their parents are dead, and Sam is notorious for having a drinking problem. Susannah’s world crumbles when the Elders of the Valley spy her bathing naked in the creek that they plan to use for baptisms. Embarrassed by their feelings of lust, the Elders pronounce Susannah wicked and plot to run her out of the valley.

The Elders spread vicious rumors and coerce other members of the community to testify against her. Susannah’s friend Little Bat, for example, is bullied into claiming that Susannah slept with him. In Act I, Scene 5, Little Bat admits to Susannah that he told the Elders:

I said you’d let me love you up.
That’s what they made me say.
I said you’d let me love you up
An’ in the worse sort o’way.⁵⁶⁸

A traveling preacher, the Reverend Olin Bitch, takes it upon himself to try to save Susannah’s soul. He exhorts her to confess her sin publically. When she refuses, he seeks her out in private, visiting her at home while Sam is out hunting. Overcome by his own desire, Bitch forces himself on Susannah. He begs for forgiveness the next morning, as he comes to terms with the fact that he has “defiled” a virgin, and he tries unsuccessfully to clear Susannah’s name.⁵⁶⁹ Importantly, he is

⁵⁶⁷ Ronald Eyer, “Carlisle Floyd’s ‘Susannah,’” *Tempo* 42 (Winter, 1956-57): 7.

⁵⁶⁸ Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah: A Musical Drama in Two Acts, Libretto* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1956), 15.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. As Bitch begs God for forgiveness, he sings: “She was untouched before her young body was defiled by hands, defiled by my lust.”

willing only to tell the Valley Elders that the Lord spoke to him of Susannah's innocence; he does not implicate himself or admit that he raped her. Later, Sam returns from his hunt. When Susannah tells him what has happened, he shoots and kills Blitch who is in the midst of a baptizing session. In the opera's final scene, an angry mob storms the Polk property. Susannah laughs derisively in their faces and chases them away from the property with a shotgun.⁵⁷⁰

As Floyd updated and adapted the biblical tale, he made several intriguing decisions which speak to *Susannah's* sexual politics. Notably missing from Floyd's adaptation is the rescuer Daniel. Before the opera's FSU premiere, a writer for the *Florida Flambeau* explained that Floyd had turned Daniel into the "itinerant evangelist" Olin Blitch.⁵⁷¹ Like Daniel, it is Blitch who learns of Susannah's innocence, but unlike Daniel, Blitch discovers her innocence by way of his own guilt and aggression. Blitch also fails to convince the people of New Hope Valley of the error of their ways. A crucial addition to Floyd's adaptation involves the rape of Susannah in Act II, Scene 3. In the biblical tale (so far as we know), Susanna is never physically violated; in the biblical tale, moreover, Susanna is not a virgin. The situation for Susannah is quite different, and in fact, by writing the rape of a virgin, Floyd turned Susannah into a victim, a staple of the operatic tradition.⁵⁷²

⁵⁷⁰ The image of Susannah with her shotgun perhaps vaguely recalls Irving Berlin's 1946 Broadway musical *Annie Get Your Gun*, adapted for film in 1950. On *Annie Get Your Gun*, see Jeffrey Magee, "Something for the Girls: *Annie Get Your Gun*, 1945-present" in *Irving Berlin's American Musical Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 226-264.

⁵⁷¹ "Premiere Of 'Susannah' Stars Curtin, Harrell February 24th," *The Florida Flambeau*, 11 January 1955, in Scrapbook 6 (Jan. 1954 - July 1956), Historical Scrapbook Collection, Warren D. Allen Music Library, Special Collections, Florida State University.

⁵⁷² The emphasis on Susannah's status as a virgin plays into the longstanding trope of the rape victim as a chaste, single woman, usually a white woman. See Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 34. This trope continues to require revision and scrutiny in the twenty-first century. See also Helen Benedict, *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

As philosopher Catherine Clément famously charged in 1979, plenty of operas feature and even seem to celebrate violence against women.⁵⁷³ Musicologist Susan McClary summarized Clément's position in the forward to the 1988 English translation of Clément's tract *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, explaining that Clément regarded opera as an art form that "demands the submission or death of the woman for the sake of narrative closure."⁵⁷⁴ Clément asserted that opera's plots inflict violence upon women, and that opera's gorgeous music glosses over that violence. During the 1990s, musicologists such as McClary, Mary Ann Smart, Carolyn Abbate, and Katherine Bergeron engaged with and challenged Clément, pointing out, for example, that the philosopher's emphasis on plot largely discounts the significance and sheer power of that which is sung by women in opera. In her 1993 essay, "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women," Abbate argued that opera be understood as "a genre that so displaces the authorial musical voice onto female characters and female singers that it largely reverses a conventional opposition of male (speaking) subject and female (observed) object."⁵⁷⁵ Noting how "Clément assumes that such plots reflect our culture's state of sexual inequalities and that they perform cultural work by intimating, over and over, that women occupy certain places and those alone, that women's defeat is a pleasurable sight for men," Abbate offered a different explanation:

Perhaps opera librettists and composers favor plots that murder women (and men, too) as a form of revenge, to assuage the anxiety born of the Jacobin uprising of performance.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷³ See Catherine Clément, *L'Opéra, ou, la Défaite des femmes, nouvelle édition* (Paris: B.Grasset, 1995, 1979).

⁵⁷⁴ Susan McClary, "Foreword: The Undoing of Opera: Toward a Feminist Criticism of Music," in Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xi.

⁵⁷⁵ Carolyn Abbate, "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, edited by Ruth Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 228.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

She also pointed out that “composers’ dependence on *women* is unique to opera,” that “women are critical in authoring the operatic work as an audible reality.”⁵⁷⁷ Thus even when (male) composers and librettists succeed in destroying a woman’s literal body on stage, her figurative body and voice prevail, continually usurping the composer’s authorial voice during the act of performance.

Yet Clément reiterated many of her previous claims in 2000, insisting once again that sopranos are the inevitable victims of opera, particularly nineteenth-century opera:

Humiliated, hunted, driven mad, burnt alive, buried alive, stabbed, committing suicide—Violetta, Sieglinde, Lucia, Brünnhilde, Aida, Norma, Mélisande, Liù, Butterfly, Isolde, Lulu, and so many others . . . All sopranos, and all victims.⁵⁷⁸

In 2006, musicologist Joseph Kerman admitted that Clément’s *Opera* was no longer “so easy to dismiss,” concluding “that our basic, traditional operatic repertory drips with female blood is incontrovertible.”⁵⁷⁹ It is worth noting that explicitly sexual violence against women, however infrequently or delicately discussed, is also not an uncommon occurrence in opera. Perhaps most famously, Don Giovanni attempts to rape Donna Anna at the very beginning of Mozart’s 1787 opera. As musicologist Micaela Baranello recently pointed out, many productions of *Don Giovanni* make Donna Anna “a liar, depicting the character as a willing participant in a late-night tryst.”⁵⁸⁰

Thus the issue of rape in *Don Giovanni* is often misrepresented on stage, and as musicologist Liane

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁷⁸ Catherine Clément, “Through Voices, History,” in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, edited by Mary Ann Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 22.

⁵⁷⁹ Joseph Kerman, “Verdi and the Undoing of Women,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 21. Kerman points out that when Clément “says ‘opera,’ she really means ‘Opéra’: not the genre opera over its entire history, but the repertory of the Paris Opéra when she grew up in and around the 1950s, just as old people in the United States grew up with Rudolf Bing and the Texaco Opera Theater.”

⁵⁸⁰ Micaela Baranello, “When Cries of Rape Are Heard in Opera Halls,” *New York Times*, 16 July 2015.

Curtis has complained, even excised from college textbooks.⁵⁸¹ Sadly, *Don Giovanni* represents a norm, both in terms of the operatic genre and in terms of responses to it. The entire premise of Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1851) is that a father must try to hide his daughter Gilda from his employer, a duke with a rapacious sexual appetite. The father fails and the duke's courtiers abduct Gilda, depositing her in the duke's bedchamber. Seeking to grant Gilda some agency, musicologist Elizabeth Hudson has argued for a reading of *Rigoletto* that accounts for the possibility that Gilda, rather than enduring rape by the duke, chose to be seduced by him.⁵⁸² It is sometimes more difficult to revise or push back against rape narratives in opera. For example, at the beginning of his examination of Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946), musicologist J.P.E. Harper-Scott acknowledges that this opera "lays the matter out clearly."⁵⁸³ *Susannah* speaks to and participates in this difficult operatic tradition. As I will suggest, Floyd follows but then subtly subverts opera's all-too-familiar, if not historic plot pattern, as though actively encouraging *Susannah* to rise up and rebel against patriarchal oppression, to remain its victim no longer. Sopranos have responded to this call, both within and beyond the bounds of the opera; *Susannah* thus allows for the possibility of a feminist reading (inspired by Abbate) of a decidedly patriarchal work (inspired by Clément).

After completing his libretto, Floyd began composing the music, and by the summer of 1954, he had a full draft of the score.⁵⁸⁴ He then headed to the Aspen Music Festival to continue

⁵⁸¹ Liane Curtis, "The Sexual Politics of Teaching Mozart's 'Don Giovanni,'" *NWSA Journal* 12, no. 1 (2000): 119. Curtis argues that many college textbooks perpetuate "a romantic tradition of heroizing the leading character as a rugged individual and marginalizing the women characters."

⁵⁸² Elizabeth Hudson, "Gilda Seduced: A Tale Untold," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 3 (1992): 247.

⁵⁸³ J.P.E. Harper-Scott, "Britten's Opera About Rape," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21 (2010): 65.

⁵⁸⁴ See Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah: A Musical Drama in Two Acts*, autograph manuscript, in ink, a gift of the composer to the Florida State University College of Music, on permanent loan to the Warren D. Allen Music Library, SPEC ML96.F56 S87.

honing his skills as a concert pianist. Coincidentally, this trip proved a crucial first step on the path that led to *Susannah*'s production, for while at Aspen, Floyd decided to approach Phyllis Curtin (1921–2016), an up-and-coming soprano on the Aspen faculty, to see if he could interest her in the title role.⁵⁸⁵ He outlined the opera's plot, and he played through *Susannah*'s two arias at the piano. Floyd has recalled on numerous occasions how he offered to play through the entire score, but Curtin said that was unnecessary.⁵⁸⁶ She was apparently hooked by the story as well as by *Susannah*'s arias "Ain't it a pretty night" and "The trees on the mountains." On 24 February 1955, Curtin went on to star in FSU's premiere of *Susannah*, and according to Floyd, she was instrumental in helping to bring *Susannah* to the New York City Opera (NYCO) the following year.⁵⁸⁷

Susannah's Arias

Without a doubt, sopranos' fondness for *Susannah*'s two arias has contributed to *Susannah*'s popularity and national legacy. In the context of the opera, "Ain't it a pretty night" and "The trees on the mountains" are dazzling moments that showcase the singer's vocal prowess, while ultimately serving to emphasize *Susannah*'s loss of innocence, hope, and self over the course of her ordeal in New Hope Valley. Speaking from a dramatic standpoint, soprano Phyllis Treigle

⁵⁸⁵ Floyd, interview with the author. See also Holliday, *Falling Up*, 123. Born in Clarksburg, West Virginia, Curtin attended Wellesley College where she studied voice with bass Joseph Regneas. She made her debut with the NYCO in 1953. The following year, she caused quite a stir when she starred in the NYCO's production *Salome*.

⁵⁸⁶ Floyd, interview with the author. See also Holliday, *Falling Up*, 123.

⁵⁸⁷ The FSU premiere of *Susannah* featured Curtin as *Susannah* and Mack Harrell as Olin Blicht. Following the premiere, Curtin and Harrell peddled *Susannah* throughout New York City, speaking with Broadway producers such as Chandler Cowles and NYCO director Joseph Rosenstock. Finally, the pair convinced Erich Leinsdorf, who succeeded Rosenstock as director of the NYCO in 1956, to give *Susannah* a chance. The NYCO first presented *Susannah* on 27 September 1956. A scheduling conflict prohibited Harrell from participating, so Norman Treigle took over the role of Blicht.

explained to me that “Ain’t it a pretty night” requires that a singer have “an understanding of Susannah’s innocence and her dreams, as well as an ability to take on this persona, so that when those dreams are crushed we can see what exactly was destroyed.”⁵⁸⁸ An accomplished singer and teacher, Treigle was a fascinating interlocutor as she is also the daughter of bass-baritone Norman Treigle (1927-1975), who during the 1950s and 1960s, sang the role of Olin Blicht in *Susannah*, opposite Curtin in the title role.⁵⁸⁹ In a sense, Phyllis Susannah Treigle has lived with *Susannah* all her life. Born in 1960, she was named in honor of both Phyllis Curtin and Floyd’s heroine. Treigle explained how the front of her birth announcement featured a quote from “Ain’t it a pretty night.”⁵⁹⁰ Inside, the birth announcement read: “The Norman Treigles present their new soprano.”⁵⁹¹

“Ain’t it a pretty night” simultaneously celebrates the mountainous Appalachian landscape and Susannah’s potential, as though tying them together and establishing Susannah as a particularly American heroine. The aria opens in G-flat major, with Susannah’s entrance preceded by a single sustained tonic in the French horn. Susannah then exclaims “Ain’t it a pretty night” over an expansive, ascending major seventh that falls by step to settle on a major sixth above the opening pitch (Example 3.1). As if confirming her pronouncement, the cellos echo Susannah. This

⁵⁸⁸ Treigle, email correspondence with the author.

⁵⁸⁹ Born in New Orleans, Norman Treigle made his debut with the New York City Opera in 1953. On Treigle’s life and career, see Brian Morgan, *Strange Child of Chaos: Norman Treigle* (New York: iUniverse, 2006). Phyllis Treigle has appeared with numerous companies including the New York City Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, and the Sarasota Opera Association. She currently serves as the Vocal Chair and Assistant Department Chair of Music at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts.

⁵⁹⁰ Treigle, email correspondence with the author.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.* Phyllis Treigle explained how she “felt destined” to be a singer and eventually, to tackle the role (and music) of Susannah.⁵⁹¹ She sang the title role in *Susannah* in 1999 in a production by Jefferson Performing Arts Society in Metairie, Louisiana. Michael Devlin, a protégé of Norman Treigle, sang the role of Olin Blicht.

sweeping melodic gesture sets the tone for the opening verse in which Susannah marvels at the sky above her, noting that it “seems so heavy with stars that it might fall right down out of heaven.”⁵⁹² She then launches into another verse, prefaced by a reprise of the ascending major-seventh motive, and she begins to imagine the world that stretches out beyond her home, citing big cities such as “Nashville and Asheville an’ Knoxville,” as well as “the folks” she has seen pictured “in the mail-order catalogues.”⁵⁹³

Example 3.1

Beginning of “Ain’t it a Pretty Night”

Adagio sostenuto ♩ = 50

Sus. Ain't it a pret - ty night!

p

“Ain’t it a pretty night” features a faster B section, marked “Ancora più mosso.” This section contrasts with what has come before, intensifying emotionally as Susannah informs the listener of her desires:

I aim to leave this valley some day an’ find out fer myself:
 To see all the tall buildin’s
 And all the street lights an’ to be one o’ them folks myself.⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹² Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 8.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

Here, the orchestration thickens, and the singer must have the strength to soar above, finally reaching up to an A-sharp above the staff and emphasizing her agency with the word “myself” (Example 3.2). Wondering if she might “get lonesome fer the valley,” Susannah appears to backpedal, as she begins to sing what sounds like a return to the A section.⁵⁹⁵ Notably, however, this “verse” is not prefaced by the ascending-seventh exclamation, and at Floyd’s indication of “con moto,” the music surges, the orchestral texture thickens, and Susannah pushes past the allusions to the A section:

But I could always come back if I got homesick fer the valley.
So I’ll leave it someday an’ see fer myself.
Someday I’ll leave an’ then I’ll come back
When I’ve seen what’s beyond them mountains.⁵⁹⁶

The musical and dramatic climax occurs on the word “mountains,” as Susannah reaches up to the highest note of the aria, a B-flat above the staff, for a second and final time (Example 3.3).⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁹⁷ “Ain’t it a pretty night” concludes with a brief recapitulation of the A section. Susannah makes a nod to the ascending major-seventh motive, now reaching up to a major ninth, before making the leisurely descent back down to a fifth above the opening pitch. After a fermata, she concludes, paraphrasing a segment of the A section (both its music and its text) in the original key of G-flat major.

Example 3.2

First half of the B section of "Ain't it a pretty night"

a tempo ♩ = ♩

Sus. I aim to leave this val-ley some day an' find out fer my-self: To see all the tall build-in's and

mf *f* *e largamente* *molto crescendo*

Sus. all the street lights an' to be one o' them folks my - self.

ff *stringendo*

Example 3.3

Second half of the B section of “Ain’t it a pretty night”

Con moto $\text{♩} = 72$

Sus. But I could al-ways come back if I got home sick fer the val ley. So I'll

stringendo

Sus. leave it some-day an' seefer my-self. Some-day I'll leave an'then I'll come back when I've

molto allargando a tempo

Sus. seen what's be-yond them mount-ains.

“Ain’t it a pretty night” is thus an homage to the United States, celebrating not only the American landscape—its rural and its urban features—but also Susannah’s thirst for adventure. In the aria’s middle section, Susannah reveals her desire for independence. She evokes the mythical image of the intrepid American explorer, and here, Floyd perhaps belies a debt to an older generation of American composers including Virgil Thomson, Roy Harris, and Aaron Copland. As musicologist Beth E. Levy has argued, American composers during the first half of the twentieth century “contributed to the ways the West was imagined, responding to its landscapes and inhabitants as Americans always have, by idolizing, exaggerating, and stereotyping.”⁵⁹⁸ Floyd’s

⁵⁹⁸ Beth E. Levy, *Frontier Figures: American Music and the Mythology of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 14.

approach to the Appalachian landscape and its inhabitants, particularly in this hopeful opening aria, is similar, as are some singers' reactions to it. At the opera's outset, Susannah appears as a young, independent, and innocent heroine, the whole world seemingly at her feet; according to Floyd's biographer, the composer "was once approached by an adoring soprano who told him that the heroine's first aria was 'our national anthem.'"⁵⁹⁹

Susannah's prospects diminish drastically over the course of the second half of the opera. At the beginning of Act II, Scene 3, Susannah sings "The trees on the mountains," a melancholy aria-ballad that serves as a contrast to "Ain't it a pretty night" both in terms of its temperament and presumed cultural affiliation. In 1960, Cleveland music critic and composer Herbert Elwell insisted that "one could hardly call [Susannah's solo numbers] arias since they were more like extended ballads."⁶⁰⁰ As I have shown, "Ain't it a pretty night" (a standard ternary-form aria) has much in common with European operatic tradition, but "The trees on the mountains" is vaguely reminiscent of the ballad, which as ethnomusicologist Scott B. Spencer points out, "is popularly connected to Appalachia."⁶⁰¹ In 2015, Floyd explained to me that he "wanted something that sounded like a folk song" and thus sought to imitate one of those "old timey ballads," invoking the "familiar theme" of "the false-hearted lover."⁶⁰² Yet even as "The trees on the mountains" gestures toward Appalachian folk traditions, the number requires a decidedly operatic technique. As

⁵⁹⁹ Anonymous soprano, quoted in Holliday, *Falling Up*, xx.

⁶⁰⁰ See Herbert Elwell, "Tennessee 'Susannah' Is Moving Spectacle," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 12 March 1960, in "Susannah" Folder, Box 2, CFP.

⁶⁰¹ Scott B. Spencer, "Ballad Collecting: Impetus and Impact," in *The Ballad Collectors of North America: How Gathering Folksongs Transformed Academic Thought and American Identity*, edited by Scott B. Spencer (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 3.

⁶⁰² Floyd, interview with the author.

Treigle points out, the aria-ballad “is quite lyrical, and the singer has to have both a lush middle and a pretty easily accessible top.”⁶⁰³ To be sure, the refrain is punctuated by a repeated octave leap (G4-G5) that eventually expands to a tenth, and the number concludes with three exposed octave leaps over a decrescendo from piano to pianissimo (Examples 3.4 and 3.5).

Example 3.4

“The trees on the mountains,” refrain

The musical score for the refrain consists of three systems, each with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 6/8. The first system shows the vocal line with lyrics: "Come back, O sum - mer, come back, blue flame. My". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "heart wants warm - in, my ba - by a name. Come back, O lov - er, if". The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings: *mp*, *cresc.*, and *ff appass.*. The third system concludes the vocal line with lyrics: "jes' fer a day. Turn bleak Dec - em - ber once more in - to...May.". The piano accompaniment includes a *dim.* marking. The score ends with a fermata over the final note of the vocal line.

⁶⁰³ Treigle, email correspondence with the author.

Example 3.5

“The trees on the mountains,” conclusion

The musical score is for a vocal piece in 6/8 time. The vocal line is marked 'a piacere' and contains the lyrics 'Come back! Come back! Come back!'. The piano accompaniment features a variety of dynamics, including *p*, *colla voce*, and *pp*. The score is presented in a standard musical notation format with a vocal staff and a grand staff for the piano accompaniment.

As an onstage song, “The trees on the mountains” connects soundly to operatic convention as well.⁶⁰⁴ When Susannah finishes the number, Blitch, who has followed her home and who according to Floyd’s stage directions, “has come onstage and stood listening,” compliments her “mighty pretty singin’.”⁶⁰⁵ Treigle suggests that Blitch “hears” the “resignation” in Susannah’s voice as she sings, and indeed, he comments, “That’s a right sad song,” continuing “Don’t look like it’d do y’ much good.”⁶⁰⁶ He then tries yet again to convince her to confess, and when she refuses, he rapes her, taking advantage of her resignation, her vulnerability, and the song that was supposed to comfort her. Susannah’s siren song, “Come on over, Little Bat” occurs two scenes later, just moments before the curtain falls. It is far too short to be considered a full-fledged aria, and it appears somewhat out of character for Susannah both vocally and textually, yet this number is especially significant, for it allows Susannah to reassert control over her body and voice.

⁶⁰⁴ The convention of onstage song in opera dates back to Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* (1607).

⁶⁰⁵ Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 25.

⁶⁰⁶ Treigle, email correspondence with the author; Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 25.

Susannah's Rape

Before turning to Susannah's siren song, however, a brief discussion of the opera's rape scene is necessary. Since *Susannah's* premiere, few music critics or musicologists have explicitly referred to Blitch's violation of Susannah as rape. In 1981, California music critic Stephanie von Buchau supplied program notes for the San Diego Opera's production of *Susannah*, and she devoted a surprising amount of space to attempting to sort out whether Blitch had "raped" or "seduced" Susannah in this sex act, which is implied because it occurs off stage, rather than on.⁶⁰⁷ Buchau claimed that most descriptions of the plot employed the word rape, but careful attention to written documentation reveals the exact opposite.⁶⁰⁸ I have yet to find a single synopsis of the opera printed in an opera company's program booklet that uses the word. In addition, writers of both popular and scholarly persuasions almost always avoid using the word. To cite just three examples spanning *Susannah's* lifetime, in 1956, *New York Times* music critic Howard Taubman described Blitch as the "itinerant preacher" who "seeks to lead Susannah to salvation" but "ends by seducing her."⁶⁰⁹ In 1979, James Chute of the *Cincinnati Post* wrote that "Blitch follows

⁶⁰⁷ On the complexities of staging or watching rape, see Lisa Fitzpatrick, "Signifying Rape: Problems of Representing Sexual Violence on Stage," in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, edited by Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 183–199; Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). In September 2015, Lady Gaga released the music video for her song "Til It Happens to You." Directed by Catherine Hardwicke, the video features three graphic depictions of rape and is prefaced by a trigger warning. Lady Gaga co-wrote "Til It Happens to You" with Diane Warren for the documentary *The Hunting Ground* (2015), which deals with the issue of sexual assault on American college campuses. See Spencer Kornhaber, "Lady Gaga's Latest Surprise: A Rape PSA," *The Atlantic*, 18 September 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/lady-gaga-til-it-happens-to-you/406066/> (accessed 3 May 2017).

⁶⁰⁸ Stephanie von Buchau, "Floyd's *Susannah*: Biblical Morality with a Contemporary Twist," in the San Diego Opera's program booklet for *Susannah* (Friday, September 25; Sunday, September 27; Wednesday, September 30; and Saturday, October 3, 1981), p. 26, loose in Box 2, CFP. While I have yet to locate similar discussions (rape versus seduction) in print, I have participated in numerous debates on this topic with singers, artistic directors, and conductors.

⁶⁰⁹ See Howard Taubman, "The Opera: 'Susannah,'" *New York Times*, 28 September 1956.

Susannah home, seduces her, and finally realizes the wrong he and the congregation have committed.”⁶¹⁰ In 2012, musicologist Helen Smith explained that “Blitch gives in to his weaker, human side” and “seduces Susannah.”⁶¹¹

In 1960, someone actually accused Susannah of being an active agent in her so-called sexual demise. *Chicago Sun-Times* music critic Robert C. Marsh complained about the message that Floyd was sending in his opera:

Floyd’s Susannah is not a woman made strong by faith, but one unable to make a strong stand for the right even when she knows she is without moral blame. Indeed, she will do something she knows to be wrong in hope of being restored to the good graces of the community.⁶¹²

This clipping appears in Floyd’s papers at the South Caroliniana Library, and someone (possibly Floyd) wrote an X and two exclamation points next to this paragraph.

Buchau did not attempt this route in 1981, yet she quickly became entangled in her own debate, calling Blitch and Susannah’s sexual encounter an “act of love” that fell somewhere “between seduction and force.”⁶¹³ She then admitted that “Blitch’s deed, whether she resisted him or not, is a violation of Susannah’s integrity,” concluding:

By involving Blitch physically with Susannah, Floyd also engages his soul in the conflict. In other words, the seduction or rape, whichever you want to call it, is not merely a plot device so that Sam Polk can have a reason for killing the preacher and then disappearing, leaving his sister alone to face the valley people. The opera is as much Blitch’s tragedy as it is Susannah’s, and he bitterly feels his fall from grace.⁶¹⁴

⁶¹⁰ See James Chute, “Susannah’s Seduction is Operatic Success,” *Cincinnati Post*, 12 July 1979, in “Susannah” Folder, Box 1, CFP.

⁶¹¹ See Smith, “Faith and Love in New Hope Valley,” 83.

⁶¹² Robert C. Marsh, critic-at-large, “American Tragedies: *Susanna* and *Susannah*,” hand-dated March 1960, in “Susannah” Folder, Box 2, CFP.

⁶¹³ Buchau, “Floyd’s *Susannah*: Biblical Morality with a Contemporary Twist,” 26.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

Buchau's discussion, her flippant reference to "seduction or rape, whichever you want to call it," and her emphasis on "Blitch's tragedy" is dated and problematic, even as it attempts to touch on the complexities of the characters shaped by Floyd.⁶¹⁵

Part of the problem, however, is that Floyd himself initially referred to this scene as a seduction. His synopsis for the NYCO's 1958 production of *Susannah* for the World's Fair in Brussels described Susannah's rape as follows:

At a revival meeting Susannah is called upon publicly by Blitch to confess and repent, and when she refuses she is pursued to her home by Blitch, who is still convinced of her guilt and reputation for lechery. He fails to force a confession and Susannah, exhausted and broken, succumbs to his advances and is seduced by him.⁶¹⁶

Yet in the Washington Opera's program booklet for *Susannah* in 1999, Floyd claimed that "seduction is the wrong word to put on the scene."⁶¹⁷ In 2015, Floyd spoke with me in similar terms, pausing on the word "seduction" and noting that to him, it "always implies assent."⁶¹⁸ Floyd also remembered that during a press conference prior to the Met's 1999 production of *Susannah*

⁶¹⁵ Confusion, conflation, and misuse regarding the words rape and seduction, however, continue in both public discourse and literary and artistic criticism. Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne address this issue in their analysis of Seamus Heaney's "Act of Union." They explain how in this poem, Heaney "speaks from the point of view of imperial England which sexually and politically subjugates its colony." Challenging Patricia Coughlan's assertion that "it is ambiguous whether this is indeed a rape or a seduction," Thompson and Gunne argue that Heaney is in fact "subtly critiqu[ing] the rape culture that defends itself by characterizing rape as 'seduction.'" See "Feminism Without Borders: The Potentials and Pitfalls of Re-theorizing Rape," in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*, 2.

⁶¹⁶ Carlisle Floyd, "The Story of 'Susannah,'" synopsis by the composer, reprinted by permission of the Publishers and Copyright owners, Boosey and Hawkes, Inc., in *Playbill* 1, no. 7, 25 June 1958, p.18, loose in Box 2, CFP.

⁶¹⁷ Floyd, quoted in Nancy Tague, "Sweet Music Indeed: An Interview with Carlisle Floyd," Washington Opera Program, August 1999, p. 20, loose in Box 2, CFP.

⁶¹⁸ Floyd, interview with the author. As a legal term, "seduction" does indeed presume consent. See Brian Donovan, "Gender Inequality and Criminal Seduction: Prosecuting Sexual Coercion in the Early-20th Century," *Law & Social Inquiry* 30, no. 1 (2005): 66. Donovan cites the nation's first seduction law, passed in New York in 1848: "A person who, under promise of marriage, or by means of a fraudulent representation to her that he is married to her, seduces and has sexual intercourse with an unmarried female of previous chaste character, is guilty of seduction under promise of marriage" (New York penal code 2175).

(which starred Renée Fleming), both Curtin and Fleming “took great offense” when someone referred to this scene as “a seduction scene.”⁶¹⁹ Relying on Curtin and Fleming’s interpretations, he explained how “it should never look as if [Susannah] willingly follows through” in this scene.⁶²⁰ Somewhat similarly, Treigle argued that by this point in the opera, Susannah had simply become “so weary,” she did not have “the strength to fight Blitch off.”⁶²¹ She explained:

In that moment when she declares that she is “so tired I just can’t fight no more” she is verbalizing the feelings of all those who have been molested by people in authority. She feels hopeless and helpless and powerless and numb.⁶²²

Soprano Sharon Daniels, who began singing the role of Susannah professionally during the 1970s with the composer directing, and who has directed it three times under Floyd’s watchful eye, stated flatly that Susannah was “not complicit.”⁶²³ The sopranos’ judicious interpretations, their unwavering understanding of Susannah as a victim of sexual abuse or assault, rather than as a woman who has given her consent, thus demonstrate what we may learn by approaching *Susannah* as a living work. The composer’s willingness to change his language, based on Curtin’s and Fleming’s expertise and perspective, is heartening and provides further evidence of the “work” as dynamic and shaped by its performers as much, if not more, than by its author.

⁶¹⁹ Floyd, interview with the author.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Treigle, email correspondence with the author.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Sharon Daniels, interview with the author, 24 June 2015, Boston, Massachusetts. Daniels is currently Associate Professor of Music at Boston University. She has sung the role of Susannah professionally on numerous occasions. She has also directed the opera. For example, in 2010, she directed a production at Boston University, attended and advised by both Floyd and Curtin.

The sopranos' insights, even if bolstered by a growing awareness of "rape culture" throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, are also supported by Floyd's original stage directions:

Susannah has covered her face with her hands, and although her body is still shaken with sobbing, she is quieter, a pathetic figure silhouetted against the post, crumpled, helpless and alone. Blitch looks at her sadly a long time. Finally with weary hesitance and obviously fighting himself, he walks up the steps to her and puts his hands cautiously on her shoulders. Susannah stands inert and spent and in no way reacts to his closeness. The remainder of the scene should be weighted with exhaustion and defeat.⁶²⁴

The orchestra accompanies these directions with an ominous pianissimo passage, featuring an almost cloying melody played by the flutes in stacked thirds and fourths above a repeating bass line. Each phrase of this melody is offset by a quarter-note rest, building up tension until the passage concludes with two piercing implied B-flat7 chords (Example 3.6).⁶²⁵

⁶²⁴ Floyd, *Susannah, Libretto*, 27. "Rape culture" is a term that has been increasingly employed by feminists since the 1970s. "Rape culture" may be defined as "a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women." See Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth, ed., *Transforming a Rape Culture, Revised Edition* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2005), xi. See also Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975); Kate Harding, *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture –and What We Can Do About It* (Boston: Da Capo Lifelong, 2015).

⁶²⁵ This melody first appears, above a different accompaniment, at the beginning of Act I, Scene Four, just after the Elders spot Susannah bathing and begin their plot to run her out of New Hope Valley.

Example 3.6

Ominous Pianissimo Passage (introducing Blitch's aria)

The musical score is for a piano accompaniment. It is in 4/4 time, marked 'Largo' with a tempo of quarter note = 48. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The score consists of two systems. The first system has a repeating bass line in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. The second system continues the bass line and introduces a new melodic line in the right hand. The passage is marked 'pp ma marc.' and 'p espr.'

Blitch then launches into an aria, arguing that even he needs to satisfy his sexual urges from time to time. At the end of the aria, Floyd's stage directions indicate:

[Blitch] brings her hand to rest on his shoulder and puts an arm around her. Susannah's arms hang slackly at her side. There is little sign of life about her, only the slow, weary shaking of her head while her eyes remain closed.⁶²⁶

At this point, the repeating bass line that served to introduce Blitch's aria returns. Blitch asks Susannah if her brother will be returning home, urging, "Let's go inside."⁶²⁷ Susannah responds, more "to herself" than to Blitch:

I'm so tired.
I jes' cain't fight no more.⁶²⁸

The flutes reappear above the repeating bass line, playing their weighted song of foreboding.

Floyd's final directions for the scene read:

⁶²⁶ Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 28.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

Blitch with his arms around her and her head on his shoulder moves her slowly to the door and into the shadows of the house.⁶²⁹

By the end of this scene, Susannah is not in any condition to give consent. She is so exhausted that she is scarcely in control of her own body, and she does not take Blitch into her cabin willingly; instead, he propels her through the door, accompanied by an almost cinematic score that frightens its listener, as though warning of Susannah's fate inside her home.⁶³⁰ Indeed, the scene concludes with a *sforzando* G7 chord, resolving to a pianissimo G minor chord (Example 3.7).

Example 3.7

Return of the Ominous Pianissimo Passage (following Blitch's aria)



Directors, however, sometimes disregard Floyd's stage directions, as well as the character of the orchestral accompaniment, and the composer and his niece have expressed frustration with productions that reinterpret Susannah's behavior in this pivotal scene as complicit.⁶³¹ When I

⁶²⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁶³⁰ Sharon Daniels spoke with me about the difficulty of staging this scene, noting that it is much easier to pull off if the woman playing Susannah is smaller than the man playing Blitch. If possible, Daniels preferred to see Blitch carry Susannah into the house, because "it's really difficult to get her up and into the house in time to make it seem like she's not helping, because she's gotta walk." Daniels's words "in time" refer to the fact that Floyd's *Susannah* includes very little transition music. Daniels, interview with the author.

⁶³¹ I interviewed Floyd in his living room. When we began talking about this scene, Floyd's niece burst in from one of the back rooms of the house and exclaimed that many people seemed to "miss the whole point" of this scene. Floyd, interview with the author.

described a production that I had recently witnessed by a regional opera company, in which Susannah lay down near the edge of the stage, writhing around suggestively and playing with her skirt as Blitch looked on lustfully, Floyd shook his head, noting that a similar problem plagued the 2014 San Francisco production. He explained that he “protested and ultimately . . . got it tempered down.”⁶³² Such unexamined liberties in staging, painting a picture of the victim as “asking for it,” demonstrate not only how this scene has been misunderstood but also how rape itself continues to be misunderstood, disbelieved, and ignored. In fact, as Kate Harding points out in her recent book *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture—and What We Can Do About It*, the primary myth surrounding rape in the United States is that “she asked for it.”⁶³³

At the same time, since the 1950s, some opera companies have used different synopses than the one initially offered by Floyd, and several of these suggest Susannah’s inability to consent. The Cincinnati Opera printed a scene-by-scene synopsis in the program accompanying their 1979 production, summarizing the scene in this way:

The lonely Susannah seeks refuge among the trees in her own front yard, but her reverie is interrupted with the appearance of Mr. Blitch, pretending to pay her a “social call” and suggesting perhaps they could pray together. The unhappy girl wants no part of praying and tired of fighting becomes an easy prey for the evil parson who stays the night.⁶³⁴

In 1981, the San Diego Opera used a similar scene-by-scene synopsis:

Sitting on her porch and singing a mournful song, Susannah is surprised to see Olin Blitch approach. He compliments her on her singing and says he has come to pray for her soul. She angrily denounces the Elders and Blitch for the lies about her and finally breaks down sobbing. Seeing her vulnerability, Blitch slyly inquires whether Sam will be home that

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ See Harding, *Asking for It*, 22. Similarly, Helen Benedict refers to this myth under the headings “Women Provoke Rape” and “Women Deserve Rape.” See *Virgin or Vamp*, 15–16.

⁶³⁴ “Synopsis,” in the Cincinnati Opera’s Program Booklet for *Susannah* (Wednesday, July 11, and Saturday, July 14, 1979), p. 27, loose in Box 2, CFP.

night, and tells Susannah that he is lonely himself and needs someone to love. When she makes no reply, he grasps her arm and leads her into the house.⁶³⁵

In the program booklet for the Orlando Opera's 1987 production, John R. Bailey described the scene as follows:

Susannah, now back home, sings to herself a sad, mournful folk-like melody. Blich appears, trying to convert Susannah and make her confess her sins. She protests her innocence, and tells him how traumatic the week has been for her. He now tells her of his work as a lonely traveling preacher, and of his need for a woman. In utter exhaustion and defeat, she is unable to resist his advances as he heads her into the house.⁶³⁶

Relying heavily on euphemism, these synopses do not explicitly refer to this scene as a rape scene, yet the language they employ certainly points more towards force and coercion than seduction.

Susannah's Siren Song

As philosopher Ann J. Cahill has pointed out, many feminists regard rape as "the ultimate expression of a patriarchal order."⁶³⁷ Susannah, however, refuses to bow to this order, thwarting any sense of narrative or musical closure in the opera. At the end of the final scene, she stands alone in her doorway, according to Floyd's stage directions, "an inviolably strong and inexorably lonely prisoner of a self-imposed exile."⁶³⁸ Like many of the tragic heroines who have come before her, Susannah sings until the curtain falls, but her final song cannot quite be said to serve to compel her to submit to or transcend the gendered violence that Clément believes to be inherent

⁶³⁵ "Susannah' Synopsis," in the San Diego Opera's Program Booklet for *Susannah* (Friday, September 25; Sunday, September 27; Wednesday, September 30; and Saturday, October 3, 1981), loose in Box 2, CFP.

⁶³⁶ John R. Bailey, "Synopsis," in the Orlando Opera's Program Booklet for *Susannah* (1986-87 season), loose in Box 2, CFP.

⁶³⁷ See Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2.

⁶³⁸ Floyd, *Susannah, Libretto*, 36.

in the operatic form. Instead, Susannah's vocalizations allude to a dangerous siren song, bringing the opera's violence to the fore while simultaneously allowing Susannah to take back her life.

As the angry crowd disperses, backing away from Susannah and her shotgun, Little Bat remains, watching Susannah "wide-eyed and frightened."⁶³⁹ Purposely harnessing her sexuality for the first time in the entire opera, Susannah begins to seduce him, coaxing him towards her with her song.⁶⁴⁰ Susannah tells Little Bat to take advantage of her, to love her up the way he claimed he had in his earlier testimony before the Valley Elders.⁶⁴¹ As she repeatedly urges for him to "come on," she emphasizes the innuendo with vocal glissandi.⁶⁴² She issues her final appeal on a throaty, moaning glissando in the very low end of the soprano range (Example 3.8). Little Bat approaches Susannah tentatively. According to Floyd's stage directions, as he moves to put his arms around her, she "slaps him viciously across the face," sending him "yelping down the steps and across the yard."⁶⁴³

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁴⁰ Here, Susannah echoes a longstanding operatic tradition, her sudden reliance on sexual attraction for her strength recalling heroines such as Carmen, Lulu, and Delilah.

⁶⁴¹ Her words recall Little Bat's confession in Act I, scene 5.

⁶⁴² Carlisle Floyd, *Susannah, A Musical Drama in Two Acts, Vocal Score* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1956, 1957), 130.

⁶⁴³ Floyd, *Susannah, Libretto*, 36.

Example 3.8

“Come on over, Little Bat”

quasi parlando

Sus. Come on o-ver, Lit-tle Bat. Don't be scared. I won't hurt y'. I'm lone-some. Come an' love me up some, (tr)

Sus. Come on. Don't be a fraid I'm all by my-self now an' y' know I was al-ler good to y'. Y'

Sus. said so yer-self. So come on. Come on.

Thus Susannah’s final moments on stage are not characterized by operatic acrobatics, as she dies of a broken heart or of consumption. Rather, she takes charge of the life she has left in her, singing a different type of song, one that contrasts starkly with the decidedly “operatic” arias she had sung previously. Conjuring the old siren song, she uses it to literally fight back against those who have wronged her. Treigle suggested to me that Susannah “claims her power at the end:

In a way Susannah is a tragic heroine (lots of bad things happen to her), but another way of seeing the ending is that she is in some ways a victor over the evil in that she decides not to let it affect her any longer.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴⁴ Treigle, email correspondence with the author.

Yet I maintain that “the evil” has affected Susannah deeply, so much so that she sounds more like an alto than a soprano at the end of the opera. Her siren song and the venomous action that follows are so contrary to her voice and character at the beginning of the opera that they serve to illuminate the consequences of the violence that the opera has inflicted upon her. Sharon Daniels recalled that when she first began singing the role of Susannah, she “couldn’t stand the ending.”⁶⁴⁵ She remembered asking Floyd: “Why doesn’t [Susannah] just leave and go to Nashville or Ashville?”⁶⁴⁶ According to Daniels, Floyd responded: “She has to stay there; she has to be embittered; she has to protect that property.”⁶⁴⁷ Floyd maintained that the moral of the story depended on a bitter ending, whereas Daniels noted that “as a young singer with feminist ideas,” she would have preferred a more heroic ending, with Susannah “transcending the tragic circumstances of her situation in some way.”⁶⁴⁸

The opera’s conclusion, however, does not erase the possibility of eventual transcendence and recovery. The siren song, even as it forces the audience to see what the opera has done to Susannah, also empowers her to reassert control over her own destiny. Floyd’s orchestration of the siren song, moreover, harkens back to the conclusion of Richard Strauss’s *Salome* (1905), for as Susannah sings, the clarinets trill incessantly in the background. (Example 3.9). Floyd insisted to

⁶⁴⁵ Daniels, interview with the author.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid. In a later email exchange, Daniels elaborated: “I believe that Carlisle would contend that Susannah’s transformation from the pure hearted free spirited young woman into the embittered and hard woman behind that gun at the end, chasing the people off her property (even her only friend Little Bat), was absolutely the strongest most honest choice for the character, and therefore leaves the audience with the message of the story.” Sharon Daniels, email correspondence with the author, 29 April 2017.

me that any allusion to *Salome* by way of this extended trill was entirely coincidental.⁶⁴⁹ But maybe it was subconscious? When Susannah sings for and then slaps Little Bat, her behavior, far from being unnecessarily cruel, reaffirms her right to her own existence, her right to perform for no man. Interestingly, this is a right Salome is denied. After she dances her provocative “Dance of the Seven Veils,” demands the head of John the Baptist, passionately kisses his lips, and then raves about it, Herodes calls for her death. Strauss’s trill introduces Salome’s final sung number, and the trill is eerie, as though pointing to her impending punishment; indeed, just before the trill, Herodes announces that something terrible will happen. Floyd’s trill is also unsettling, but it serves to signal Little Bat’s, rather than Susannah’s punishment.

Example 3.9

“Ah! Ich habe deinen Mund geküsst”

The image shows a musical score for the vocal line of Salome. The score is in 4/4 time and consists of two systems. The first system shows the piano accompaniment with a *poco f* dynamic marking. The second system shows the vocal line for Salome, starting with a rest followed by a melodic phrase. The lyrics are: "Ah! Ich ha-be dei-nen Mund ge-küsst. Ah! I have kissed thy mouth,". The score includes a trill marked with a wavy line and a flat symbol (b) above it. The tempo is marked "sehr gedehnt" with a quarter note equal to 58 (♩=58). The piano accompaniment features a prominent trill in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand.

⁶⁴⁹ Floyd, interview with the author.

In 1977, Floyd insisted to Harry Haskell of the *Kansas City Star* that Susannah's final moments on stage symbolize a kind of liberation.⁶⁵⁰ Interestingly, when I asked Floyd in 2015 what he imagined Susannah's future to hold, he referred to Phyllis Curtin's interpretation: "You know what Phyllis says? She says [Susannah] becomes a pine tree."⁶⁵¹ When I spoke with Curtin in March 2015, she explained: "She's a strong girl, and she'll be up there on that hillside all by herself."⁶⁵² During our conversation, Curtin repeatedly referred to Susannah as "a strong girl." Sixty years after the opera's premiere, when many of the details of her interpretation of the role had faded, the first Susannah held fast, not to her heroine's heartbreak or trauma, but rather, to her strength and her will to survive.

Phyllis Curtin's Susannah

A brief look at Curtin's career demonstrates how the soprano remained deeply invested in both Susannah and *Susannah* throughout her life.⁶⁵³ Curtin took Floyd's opera under her wing during the summer of 1954. It was she who telephoned Mack Harrell, also at the Aspen Music Festival that summer, to encourage him to consider the role of Olin Blicht.⁶⁵⁴ After leading FSU's

⁶⁵⁰ Floyd, quoted in Harry Haskell, "Susannah' Composer Aims for Believability," *Kansas City Star*, 18 September 1977, in "Susannah" Folder, Box 1, CFP.

⁶⁵¹ Floyd, interview with author. Floyd's recollection recalls another Strauss opera. At the end of *Daphne* (1938), the chaste title heroine transforms into a tree after Apollo pursues her.

⁶⁵² Phyllis Curtin, telephone interview with the author, 17 March 2015.

⁶⁵³ Floyd has often acknowledged Curtin's dedication to his opera and to the title role. He prefaced the 1957 piano-vocal score with the following inscription: "The composer wishes to acknowledge gratefully the invaluable contribution of Phyllis Curtin, both for her unflinching belief in the opera and for her laudable creation of the title role." On August 4, 2007, Floyd spoke at a tribute to Curtin by the Aston Magna Foundation in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, asserting that he could "easily and truthfully" refer to the opera as "*Susannah, or the Story of Phyllis Curtin*." Floyd, quoted in Holliday, *Falling Up*, 402.

⁶⁵⁴ In 2015, both Floyd and Curtin recalled how Curtin had immediately telephoned Harrell in his Aspen cabin. Holliday writes about this important chapter in *Susannah's* history as well. See *Falling Up*, 123.

production of *Susannah*, Curtin and Harrell peddled the opera throughout New York City, speaking with Broadway producers such as Chandler Cowles and NYCO director Joseph Rosenstock.⁶⁵⁵ Finally, the pair convinced Erich Leinsdorf, who succeeded Rosenstock as director of the NYCO in 1956, to give *Susannah* a chance.⁶⁵⁶

In 1997, Curtin recalled that it was her “great fortune to be the very first *Susannah*,” concluding that “this girl, this opera . . . are engraved on my heart.”⁶⁵⁷ Born in Clarksburg, West Virginia, Curtin asserted during an interview with Chicago broadcaster Bruce Duffie that she “understood *Susannah* right to the ground.”⁶⁵⁸ Similarly, she told me:

I’m a hill-country girl myself. I have thought about a lot of things sitting on that mountainside, singing away.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁵ Chandler Cowles, who had produced Menotti’s *The Medium* and *The Consul* on Broadway, apparently found *Susannah* too grim for Broadway by the mid-1950s. See Holliday, *Falling Up*, 131. The NYCO’s Joseph Rosenstock simply stated that he did not have the funds or support. According to musicologist Tedrin Blair Lindsay, “American opera continued to figure ever more prominently in the company’s repertoire” during Rosenstock’s tenure, which included productions of Alex and David Tamkin’s *The Dybbuk* (1952), Menotti’s *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1952), *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1952-1954), and *The Consul* (1952-1953), Marc Blitzstein’s *Regina* (1953), Copland’s *The Tender Land* (1954), and Jerome Kern’s *Show Boat* (1954). See “The Coming of Age of American Opera: New York City Opera and the Ford Foundation, 1958-1960,” PhD Dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2009, 112. Thus Rosenstock might have been a good advocate for *Susannah*, had he not been about to lose his job with the NYCO, largely because of internal politics and disagreements.

⁶⁵⁶ When a scheduling conflict prohibited Harrell from participating, Norman Treigle took over the role of Olin Blitch, singing in the New York premiere on 27 September 1956.

⁶⁵⁷ Phyllis Curtin, “Phyllis Curtin: In Her Own Words,” liner notes, *Opera Arias*, Phyllis Curtin (soprano) © 1997 by VAI, VAI 1152, compact disc.

⁶⁵⁸ See “Soprano Phyllis Curtin: A Conversation with Bruce Duffie,” 24 August 2003, <http://www.bruceDuffie.com/curtin.html> (accessed 3 May 2017).

⁶⁵⁹ Curtin, telephone interview with the author.

Curtin also noted that she was familiar with preachers like Olin Blich “who used to go through West Virginia . . . doing things just like Olin Blich does.”⁶⁶⁰ Curtin thus identified with the world of Floyd’s opera, as well as the characters who inhabited that world.

Floyd has suggested that Curtin was drawn to the role of Susannah for an even more pointed personal reason. In April 1954, after starring in the NYCO’s production of *Salome*, Curtin was apparently censured from a church pulpit in her hometown because of some photographs that appeared in *Life Magazine*.⁶⁶¹ As Curtin’s first husband wrote in his memoir in 2005, the soprano made “a hit with the dance of the seven veils,” and “the media made much of it.”⁶⁶² *Life* featured images of Curtin dancing in the NYCO’s production, and rather than being proud of a native daughter, Clarksburg church leaders took offense. As Floyd explained to me, Curtin related this story to him at Aspen, during their first meeting about *Susannah*.⁶⁶³ Floyd’s biographer writes about this incident as well, reporting that matters were “compounded” when Curtin had an affair with *Life* photographer Gene Cook; Phyllis and Philip Curtin eventually divorced, and Phyllis married Cook in 1956.⁶⁶⁴ Thus Curtin was perhaps uniquely positioned to approach the role of Susannah

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ See “Passionate’ Salome: American Soprano is Unveiled as a Talented Operatic Wiggler,” *Life*, April 12, 1954, p. 81-84. Curtin was pictured dancing provocatively in a diaphanous and flowing costume, her legs mostly bare.

⁶⁶² See Philip D. Curtin, *On the Fringes of History, A Memoir* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), 69. A historian known especially for his work on the Atlantic slave trade, Curtin earned his PhD at Harvard University in 1953. Over the course of his academic career, he taught at Swarthmore College, the University of Wisconsin, and Johns Hopkins University. Philip and Phyllis Curtin married sometime in the late 1940s and divorced in 1956.

⁶⁶³ Floyd, interview with the author. Floyd recalled that Curtin “had been denounced from a pulpit in West Virginia . . . for doing the role of Salome . . . She told me that a local minister in her hometown had questioned the appropriateness of her doing the role.”

⁶⁶⁴ Holliday, *Falling Up*, 123. Cook went on to photograph Curtin for the City Opera’s *Susannah*. In his memoir, Philip D. Curtin wrote that his wife’s meeting with Cook “in connection with *Salome* probably touched off changes that would have happened sooner or later in any case.” See *On the Fringes of History*, 69. He also reported that their divorce “was final in April 1956, and that Phyllis married Eugene Cook in Las Vegas the next day.” (p. 92).

as something real, something lived, something that spoke to her experience as an American woman during an era in which failure to conform to expectation was not without its consequences.

Susannah's National Legacy

Thus far, I have argued for a reading of *Susannah* that prioritizes its feminist implications and legacy, accrued over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The opera, however, is rarely approached through this lens. When *Susannah* had its premiere, for example, commentators highlighted the opera's relevance to a folk-inflected national opera tradition. Then, in the late 1970s, music critics and opera companies began to advertise *Susannah* as a composer's carefully coded commentary on the intolerance and false accusations that characterized the McCarthy era, encouraging viewers to regard *Susannah* as a reflection on a scarring chapter in American history and thus re-emphasizing the opera's national relevance. There are limitations, however, to this nationalistic approach. Viewing *Susannah* as a model for a folk-inflected American opera obscures *Susannah's* connection to and eventual departure from European operatic tradition, while viewing *Susannah* as an allegory for McCarthyism makes too much of historical hindsight. Both of these tactics, moreover, bury the opera's feminist message, celebrating an American nationalism at the expense of *Susannah's* own struggle.

Susannah's Premiere and Early Reception

Susannah's FSU premiere was a major event in Tallahassee. Local newspapers such as the *Tallahassee Democrat* and *Florida Flambeau* eagerly covered the preparations for opening night, supplying a steady stream of articles with headlines such as "Singers for Opera Arrive This Week," "FSU Senior Might Steal the Show!," and "Stars Plunge Into Preparations for Opera Premiere this

Week.” When the great unveiling finally took place, local critics responded enthusiastically.

“Carlisle Floyd . . . is not a backwoods or nostalgic southerner,” one reporter declared:

Instead, he has the initiative and creativeness of the new south which has come to life in the decade since World War II.⁶⁶⁵

Dr. Warren D. Allen, Professor of Musicology at FSU, announced proudly:

Carlisle Floyd put Florida State University on the operatic map last night. A young concert pianist on the faculty, Floyd showed himself a man to be reckoned with in setting American grassroots traditions to effective words and music.⁶⁶⁶

It is not particularly surprising that the Tallahassee community hailed Floyd’s opera as an American achievement; what was surprising was the fact that the accolades did not stop in Tallahassee.

When the NYCO gave *Susannah* her national debut the following fall, New York’s music critics were kind, if not entirely convinced by the new work. Howard Taubman wrote that *Susannah* “impressed one with its dramatic power and sincerity. It has weaknesses, plenty of them, but it also has one of the finest scenes in the growing catalogue of American opera.”⁶⁶⁷ The scene to which Taubman was referring was the “Revival Scene,” and he described it in vivid detail:

In the second scene of the second act, Mr. Floyd’s opera achieves stunning cogency. The occasion is a revival meeting in the village church. As the congregation sings a hymn, the preacher works himself up into a state of religious ecstasy. At first, he speaks against the singing of the congregation; then his voice takes on a vibrato, and finally it bursts into song. The scene builds to a strong climax. As musical theatre, it is of the first order.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁵ “‘Not Backwoods Southerner’: Floyd’s Music Represents New South,” newspaper clipping in Scrapbook 6, Florida State University.

⁶⁶⁶ Dr. Warren D. Allen, “American Traditions Set to Music,” *Tallahassee Democrat*, Friday, 25 February 1955, in Scrapbook, Oversize Box 14, CFP.

⁶⁶⁷ Taubman, “The Opera: ‘Susannah.’”

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Francis D. Perkins of the *New York Herald-Tribune* evaluated *Susannah* in similar language, also focusing on larger ensemble scenes such as the “Revival Scene”:

In these scenes, Mr. Floyd’s music has its most individual flavor and atmosphere; it also has local color with some suggestion, but not imitation, of folk tunes.⁶⁶⁹

Perkins concluded that *Susannah* “reveals a distinct, while not fully developed talent for dramatic expression in music and for the projection of emotional atmosphere.”⁶⁷⁰

Susannah weathered the 1950s extremely well, quickly becoming a favorite in the NYCO’s American repertoire.⁶⁷¹ As Elise K. Kirk writes, *Susannah* “turned out to be the major event of the [1956] season” and the “one bright spot” of Leinsdorf’s single dismal year as the NYCO’s General Manager.⁶⁷² Indeed, in 1957, Taubman reviewed the NYCO’s *Susannah* again, omitting his prior criticisms and referring to the opera as “last year’s find.”⁶⁷³ By the end of the decade, many critics were crediting Floyd with reinvigorating the American operatic scene after Menotti. In 1959, Eric Salzman suggested that *Susannah*’s “successful presentation in the fall of 1956 was one of the events

⁶⁶⁹ Francis D. Perkins, “City Opera Gives ‘Susannah’ Its First N.Y. Performance,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 September 1956.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁷¹ The NYCO performed *Susannah* thirteen times in New York between 1956 and 1960. See Martin L. Sokol, “Annals, 1944-1981,” in *The New York City Opera: An American Adventure* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 298-318.

⁶⁷² Kirk, *American Opera*, 286. Kirk writes that when Leinsdorf was appointed General Manger of the NYCO in 1955, “he brought with him a whirlwind of ideas about ways to revitalize the ailing company—or so he thought. One was to build a revolving stage that would minimize production costs. The experiment failed, however, and the company’s grim financial situation continued to escalate.” In fact, the NYCO’s Spring 1957 season had to be cancelled. In his memoir, Leinsdorf himself admitted that his year at the NYCO amounted to “a spectacular failure,” although “it can be argued that I had some pretty tight alibis for portions of the City Opera fiasco, yet when all the returns were in, the most objective judge would still blame me for a botched-up assignment.” See Erich Leinsdorf, *Cadenza: A Musical Career* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), 159.

⁶⁷³ See Howard Taubman, “Music: American Opera: ‘Susannah’ Performed at the City Center,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1957.

that prepared the way for the burst of American works that followed.”⁶⁷⁴ Salzman was referring to the all-American opera seasons sponsored by the Ford Foundation at the City Opera that began in the spring of 1958.⁶⁷⁵ The NYCO featured *Susannah* on all three of these seasons, solidifying its status within the American operatic repertoire.⁶⁷⁶

Despite *Susannah*'s immediate popularity, it is important to note that not everyone regarded the work as such a landmark achievement. Joseph Kerman reviewed *Susannah* for the journal *Notes* in 1958, and while he grudgingly admitted that *Susannah* had managed to impress “a good number of intelligent music critics,” he charged that the opera was in fact full of faults.⁶⁷⁷ Kerman cited aspects musical, dramatic, and theological, and he compared Floyd's aesthetic to both “*Redbook*” and the “stereotypes of middle-grade Hollywood.” Seeking to explain away the opera's appeal, he quipped “We are desperate for American opera.”⁶⁷⁸

Kerman's final summation, however harsh, does point to the way in which *Susannah* was initially, and to some extent, continually understood. The opera's Appalachian setting, dialect, and folk-inflected score have repeatedly enticed those invested in the development of a so-called authentic national operatic tradition. In 1955, Allen explained:

⁶⁷⁴ See Eric Salzman, “‘Susannah’ Sung By City Company: Opera by Carlisle Floyd Is Heard for 4th Season in Another Team Effort,” *New York Times*, 20 April 1959.

⁶⁷⁵ On the NYCO's all-American opera seasons, see Lindsay, “The Coming of Age of American Opera.” Lindsay asserts that *Susannah*'s “success was one of the keys to that of American opera at New York City Opera.” (p. 115)

⁶⁷⁶ As Lindsay writes, “the perfect capstone” for the first all-American opera season (1958) “came with the international exposure the 1958 Brussels World's Fair afforded to three contrasting masterpieces of American music drama/comedy, *Susannah*, *Carousel*, and *Wonderful Town*, as well as a new Menotti opera *Maria Golovin*.” See “The Coming of Age of American Opera,” 225.

⁶⁷⁷ Joseph Kerman, “Review: Carlisle Floyd: *Susannah*. A Musical Drama in 2 Acts, Text and Vocal Score by the Composer,” *Notes* 15, no. 3 (1958): 478.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 478.

The librettist-composer has drawn upon the Tennessee Mountain storehouse of square dance fiddle tunes, revivalist gospel-melodies, and modal folk-tunes without literal quotations, but in the authentic spirit of mountaineer idioms.⁶⁷⁹

Five years later, Herbert Elwell put *Susannah*'s "folklore" into a broader operatic context:

The grim Apocryphal story of *Susannah* was transferred by Floyd to a Tennessee valley where sadism, religious hysteria and treachery make for rustic operatic melodrama such as can be found in "Pagliacci" or "Cavalleria Rusticana." It is in the language of hillbillies, and much of the music is like the balladry sung in the southern mountains.⁶⁸⁰

Phyllis Curtin also made a comparison between *Susannah* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*, but she went about it in a different way, complaining about music critics' emphasis on the opera's supposed nationalism and regionalism:

The sad thing is how long *Susannah* was looked down on as a 'folk opera.' Well, it's no more a folk opera than *Cavalleria Rusticana*, but people have thought it was an opera about hillbillies. It's about people who are just like anyone else with their feelings and problems and prejudices and it happens to be set in that place.⁶⁸¹

While much of *Susannah*'s early reception demonstrates how viewers understood Floyd's opera as a model for (or a poor example of) a distinctively "American opera" about the American "folk," Curtin's words demonstrate what we overlook when we dogmatically approach the opera from this angle. To be fair, however, Floyd himself perhaps encouraged the folk categorization. When I interviewed him in 2015, he talked about *Susannah* in relation to Kurt Weill's folk opera *Down in the Valley*.

⁶⁷⁹ Allen, "American Traditions Set to Music."

⁶⁸⁰ Elwell, "Tennessee 'Susannah' Is Moving Spectacle."

⁶⁸¹ Phyllis Curtin, quoted in Robert Wilder Blue, "A Conversation with Phyllis Curtin," *Festival Opera.com* <http://www.festivalopera.org/curtin.htm> (accessed 3 May 2017).

Susannah and Down in the Valley

Initially conceived and recorded as a radio opera in 1945, *Down in the Valley* received its stage premiere at Indiana University in 1948.⁶⁸² The short opera tells the story of the ill-fated romance between Brack Weaver and Jennie Parsons through preexistent American folk songs such as the well-known number to which the title refers.⁶⁸³ Musicologist John Graziano points out that *Down in the Valley* is Weill's only opera to employ actual folk songs "so extensively" throughout.⁶⁸⁴ "In fact," Graziano writes, "the folk song idiom so infuses this 'folk opera' that Weill's newly composed song for Jennie, 'Brack Weaver, My True Love,' approaches the 'folk authenticity' of the preexistent tunes."⁶⁸⁵ In 1954, Aaron Copland would "similarly transform borrowed materials" in his opera *The Tender Land*, according to Stephen Hinton.⁶⁸⁶

⁶⁸² According to John Graziano, Weill and his librettist Arnold Sundgaard intended *Down in the Valley* to be part of an ongoing radio series. When no one could be convinced to underwrite the series, the opera, which had already been recorded, was shelved. In 1947, Weill was approached by Hans Heinsheimer "to recommend an opera appropriate for a school production . . . Weill and Sundgaard revised their dormant radio play to make it suitable for a college opera-workshop production." See "Musical Dialects in *Down in the Valley*," in *A New Orpheus: Essays on Kurt Weill*, edited by Kim H. Kowalke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 298.

⁶⁸³ Traced back to Missouri, "Down in the Valley" appears in George Lyman Kittredge's 1917 collection of ballad and song texts, published in the *Journal of American Folklore*. See "Ballads and Songs" *Journal of American Folklore* 30, no. 117 (1917): 346-347. Sometimes referred to as "Birmingham Jail," "Down in the Valley" has been recorded by numerous performers including Darby and Tarlton, Burl Ives, Lead Belly, Pete Seeger, Otis Redding, and Solomon Burke.

⁶⁸⁴ Graziano, "Musical Dialects in *Down in the Valley*," 300.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁶⁸⁶ Stephen Hinton, "Down in the Valley," *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/O008229> (accessed 3 May 2017). *The Tender Land* incorporates the following folk songs: "Zion's Walls," "Cottage by the Sea," and "If you want to go a courtin'." As musicologist Elizabeth B. Crist points out, Copland found these folksongs in published collections. See "Mutual Responses in the Midst of an Era: Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*," *Journal of Musicology* 23, no. 4 (2006): 500. On *The Tender Land*, see also Ryan Patrick Jones, "The Tender Land: Aaron Copland's American Narrative," PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2005.

Susannah might be understood in relation to the genre of folk opera, but not as part of it.

When I spoke with Floyd in 2015, he mused:

The fifties were a different time. There was a lot of emphasis on Americana. Do you know Kurt Weill? He did an opera, *Down in the Valley*, which was very successful at the time. He was certainly the most noted European to try his hand at American opera.⁶⁸⁷

As Floyd continued, he began to talk about why he had decided to adapt the Biblical tale of Susanna and the Elders, and why he had decided to move it to the mountains of Tennessee. It would seem then that the connection between *Susannah* and *Down in the Valley* had more to do with setting and locale than genre. Both operas are set in rural America, but unlike *Down in the Valley*, *Susannah* makes no use of pre-existent folk song melodies. Furthermore, while *Susannah* premiered at a university, it was hardly composed for young singers or amateurs – the title roles were sung by professional opera singers. Conversely, when Weill revised *Down in the Valley* for Indiana University, his purpose was to create a new genre of American opera, suitable for colleges and universities as well as amateur groups. Weill asserted that *Down in the Valley* could “be performed wherever a chorus, a few singers, and a few actors are available.”⁶⁸⁸ Floyd may have been encouraged by Weill’s acceptance of American folk music in *Down in the Valley*, yet ultimately, his *Susannah* remains somewhat separate from the folk opera tradition of the 1940s and 1950s.

Susannah and McCarthyism

During the late 1970s, Americans began to approach *Susannah*’s nationalism and regionalism from yet another angle. Suddenly, the words “McCarthy Era” and “McCarthyism”

⁶⁸⁷ Floyd, interview with the author.

⁶⁸⁸ Kurt Weill, quoted in H.W. Heinsheimer, “Right Kind of Opera Has Market in America,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1949. Cited in Graziano, “Musical Dialects in *Down in the Valley*,” 297.

appeared increasingly in discussions of the opera. For example, the Cincinnati Opera produced *Susannah* in the summer of 1979, and as Nancy Malitz explained to readers of the *Cincinnati*

Enquirer:

Floyd's opera is about intolerance, and the helpless victims of it. It is no accident that it was completed 29 years ago, in 1955, during a terrifying period of political intolerance in America . . . Floyd's opera spoke a special message to the America of the McCarthy Era.⁶⁸⁹

According to Floyd's biographer Thomas Holliday, it was Nathan Samuel Blount, who "influenced by the recent McCarthy and Johns investigations . . . proposed updating the action to the present day."⁶⁹⁰ Charley Eugene Johns was something of Senator Joseph McCarthy's Florida counterpart; as Holliday notes, Johns spent his two years as the state's governor (1953-1955) and eleven subsequent years in the state senate campaigning against supposed communists, civil rights advocates, and homosexuals in Florida.⁶⁹¹ He became most famous for his work as chair of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, nicknamed the "Johns Committee," which ultimately targeted (and ruined the lives) of hundreds of teachers and students in Florida's state university system.⁶⁹²

⁶⁸⁹ Nancy Malitz, "'Susannah' Dares to be Different," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Sunday, 8 July 1979, in "Susannah" Folder, Box 1, CFP.

⁶⁹⁰ Holliday, *Falling Up*, 118.

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 117. Charley Eugene Johns was elected to the Florida State Senate in 1947. He served as Acting Governor of Florida from 1953-1955, following the death of Governor Dan McCarty. He ran for re-election in 1955 but was defeated by Leroy Collins. Thus, he made his mark as chair of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee.

⁶⁹² On Charley Eugene Johns and the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, see Devon A. Wright, "The Florida Legislative Investigation Committee and its Conflict with the Miami Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," Thesis, Florida International University, 2002; James A. Schnur, "Cold Warriors in the Hot Sunshine: The Johns Committee's Assault on Civil Liberties in Florida, 1956-1965," Thesis, University of South Florida, 1995; Bonnie Stark, "McCarthyism in Florida: Charley Johns and the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee, July 1956-1965," Thesis, University of South Florida, 1985. See also Julian E. Farris's historically informed novel, *The Sin Warriors* (Maple Shade, New Jersey: Lethe Press, 2012). Holliday reports that although the composer himself never faced charges, he "found himself enmeshed in the tribulations of colleagues and students in a miasma of anxiety and fear." See *Falling Up*, 117.

Whether or not Blount truly sought to provide a commentary on the McCarthy and Johns hearings through a recasting of the story of Susanna and the Elders remains unclear. To my knowledge, Blount never spoke about his involvement during early stages of *Susannah's* development, and he died in 1989.⁶⁹³ Floyd insisted to me, moreover, that he did not make the McCarthy connection until well into the 1970s, at which point music critics had been pestering him for years, asserting that Floyd *must* have been influenced by McCarthyism. As Floyd put it:

I began ultimately to think in the back of my head that this [*Susannah*] was my *Crucible*, because certainly, the heart of the story is very much the same.⁶⁹⁴

Floyd was referring, of course, to Arthur Miller's 1953 dramatization of the Salem Witch Trials, which Miller intended to serve as a commentary on McCarthyism.⁶⁹⁵ Interestingly, *The Crucible* opened at the Martin Beck Theater in New York on 22 January 1953, closing on 11 July 1953.⁶⁹⁶ Its Broadway run thus coincided with *Susannah's* genesis, yet it is noteworthy that throughout the 1950s and 1960s, *Susannah* appears not to have been understood as a commentary on McCarthyism. Sopranos Phyllis Curtin and Phyllis Treigle both claim to have been ignorant of any such commentary. When I asked Curtin if McCarthyism informed the way she approached *Susannah*, she responded emphatically: "Oh, I never thought about that for a minute."⁶⁹⁷ I posed the question to Treigle, and she answered:

⁶⁹³ See Memorial Resolution for Nathan Samuel Blount.

⁶⁹⁴ Floyd, interview with the author.

⁶⁹⁵ See Arthur Miller, "It Could Happen Here—And Did," *New York Times*, 30 April 1967.

⁶⁹⁶ See "The Crucible," Internet Broadway Database (IBDB) <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=2211> (accessed 3 May 2017). The New York City Opera (NYCO) commissioned an operatic adaptation of *The Crucible* in 1961. Composer Robert Ward used a libretto adapted by Bernard Stambler *The Crucible*, and they NYCO gave the premiere on 26 October 1961. On the operatic *Crucible*, see Robert Paul Kolt, *Robert Ward's The Crucible: Creating an American Musical Nationalism* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009).

⁶⁹⁷ Curtin, telephone interview with the author.

Actually, to be honest, this is the first I have heard of it. I can certainly see why people would make this connection. It makes a lot of sense, since the townspeople are becoming agitated in a similar way to what happened during the McCarthy Era.⁶⁹⁸

She continued, explaining:

My reading of this opera was not informed by McCarthyism, but more by the hypocrisy of some church goers, and particularly some of their leaders, something I believe both my father and I were familiar with in our lives, and I think perhaps Carlisle Floyd as well.⁶⁹⁹

Treigle's words remind one that the hypocrisy so prevalent during the 1950s was hardly unique to that era or its politics. Curtin too insisted to me that *Susannah's* plot was "fundamental to human nature."⁷⁰⁰

Susannah's ability to shed light on the McCarthy Era, however, has proven especially compelling – for audiences, performers, opera companies, and even the composer himself.⁷⁰¹ Floyd admitted to me that he had "lived through that very dark era as a very young professor," and that perhaps subconsciously, that experience came to shape *Susannah*.⁷⁰² This explanation is consistent with Floyd's statements since the late 1970s. In 1979, Malitz quoted Floyd as saying:

That general atmosphere of the witch hunt spilled over into everything . . . I was teaching in Tallahassee, and I felt it even there.⁷⁰³

Similarly, he noted one year later to Robert Croan of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*:

⁶⁹⁸ Treigle, email correspondence with the author.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁰ Curtin, telephone interview with the author.

⁷⁰¹ Other operas from the 1950s have increasingly been read in this light as well. Crist has argued that both Copland's *The Tender Land* and Bernstein's *Candide* be understood as commentaries on the McCarthy era. For example, she contends that in *The Tender Land*, "the very first scene finds Ma singing about the "cold, cold weather," a sure reference to the temperature of American domestic and international politics at the time." See "Mutual Responses in the Midst of an Era," 502.

⁷⁰² Floyd, interview with the author.

⁷⁰³ Floyd, quoted in Malitz, "Susannah' Dares to be Different."

The thing I sometimes forget is that it was written during the McCarthy era. For any of us who lived through that era it is impossible not to have been touched by it. It became a disease. To point the accusing finger was very simple, and nobody was immune. There has to be a climate for this, and it existed when I started the libretto in '53.⁷⁰⁴

Over the years, Floyd has embraced political readings of *Susannah*, and he has spoken increasingly of his experience of Florida's version of McCarthyism and the man who fanned its flames. As Raymond Gouin reported following a 2010 production of *Susannah* at Boston University (BU), Floyd, who advised the production, "spent several minutes describing the reign of terror that descended upon Florida State University during this period, of the campus committees set up there and elsewhere to insure 'correctness,' and how even the slightest suspicion was enough to destroy a career."⁷⁰⁵

Historical distance provides a more focused lens through which to view McCarthyism, and it is tempting to assign *Susannah*'s guilt by mere accusation and obliterated reputation new significance.⁷⁰⁶ Yet one of the major problems with this aspect of *Susannah*'s Cold War legacy is that the chronology does not quite compute. Although Floyd's biographer infers a connection

⁷⁰⁴ Floyd, quoted in Robert Croan, "Composer Floyd Staging His Own 'Susannah' to Open Opera Season," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 9, 1980, in "Susannah" Folder, Box 1, CFP.

⁷⁰⁵ Raymond Gouin, "Floyd's *Susannah* in Boston," *Opera Today*, 27 April 2010 http://www.operatoday.com/content/2010/04/floyds_susannah.php (accessed 3 May 2017).

⁷⁰⁶ While some studies of McCarthy and McCarthyism appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, serious examination of and reflection on the Wisconsin senator and the era in which he exerted so much influence really began to proliferate during the 1970s. In this respect, it makes sense that Americans' understanding of McCarthyism began to inform *Susannah*'s reception during the 1970s as well. For an example of an early biography of McCarthy, see Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970). In 1976, playwright Lillian Hellman published her memoir of the McCarthy era. See *Scoundrel Time, Introduction by Gary Wills* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976). In 1978, British novelist and historian David Cauter published *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978). During the 1980s and 1990s, even more scholarship on the McCarthy era began to appear. See Mark Landis, *Joseph McCarthy: The Politics of Chaos* (Selinsgrove: Sesquehanna University Press, 1987); Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994); Griffin Fariello, *Red Scare: Memories of the American Inquisition, An Oral History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995).

between Floyd's experience of Florida McCarthyism and his work on *Susannah*, it is important to note that Floyd completed *Susannah* in 1954, two years before the formation of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee that wreaked so much of the havoc that Floyd described at the BU production in 2010. The precise relationship between *Susannah* and McCarthyism seems to be one brought out by reflection, and thus while a link between Floyd's opera and the domestic political landscape of the early Cold War remains, it is heavily colored by the benefit of historical hindsight and likely also indebted to our desire to fashion the composer as hero, resisting the repressive politics of his time.

Susannah's Odyssey

While music critics and opera companies tend to advertise Floyd's opera by embellishing its national relevance, this type of advertising, no doubt employed to fill seats, is somewhat disingenuous and unfortunately, also serves to obscure any possibility of reading *Susannah* as a feminist operatic critique. Responding to Clément, Abbate explained operatic plots that murder women (and men) by pointing to authors' possible "anxiety" about "the Jacobin uprising of performance."⁷⁰⁷ Yet *Susannah's* life in the United States, coinciding with the resurgence of the feminist movement, has perhaps been nourished by such uprising.⁷⁰⁸

Since its FSU premiere, *Susannah* has remained a favorite American opera among college and conservatory opera programs across the United States. Given the recent attention to the issues

⁷⁰⁷ Abbate, "Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women," 255.

⁷⁰⁸ Scholars have debated when precisely the modern feminist movement began in the United States, yet many note that the movement coalesced during in the 1960s, as various women's liberation groups sprang up across the country. See Stephanie Gilmore, ed., *Feminist Coalitions: Historical Perspectives on Second-Wave Feminism in the United States, with a foreword by Sara M. Evans* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

of sexual assault and sexual misconduct on American college campuses—as evinced by a number of high-profile publications and documentaries on the subject, by the American Association of Universities’ 2015 campus climate survey, and by the reality that as of this writing, there are well over two hundred Title IX investigations relating to sexual assault allegations ongoing at more than a hundred American colleges and universities—*Susannah’s* continued campus presence is all the more relevant.⁷⁰⁹ Moreover, previous productions of this opera *have* taken contemporary issues involving sexual politics into account, providing a precedent for continued political engagement on stage.

In 1993, Chicago music critic John von Rhein wrote about the Lyric Opera of Chicago’s production of *Susannah* within the very real context of a woman’s right to resist sexual harassment and violence. Rhein reported that Lyric director Robert Falls had “read through [Floyd’s] score during the 1991 Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings.”⁷¹⁰ Emphasizing *Susannah* as a reflection of “the oppression of single women in a patriarchal society,” Falls explained:

⁷⁰⁹ The American Association of Universities (AAU) began designing a survey in the fall of 2014 to help better understand the issue of sexual assault and misconduct on college campuses. The survey was administered to 27 institutes of higher education in the spring of 2015. According to the results, released in September 2015, “11.7 percent of student respondents across 27 universities reported experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact by physical force, threats of physical force, or incapacitation since they enrolled at their university.” See AAU Campus Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct: Overview, Key Findings, Executive Summary, <http://www.aau.edu/Climate-Survey.aspx?id=16525> (accessed 3 May 2017). In 2015, *It Happened Here* and *The Hunting Ground*, two documentaries dealing with sexual assault on college campuses, were released on DVD. See also Sara Carrigan Wooten and Roland W. Mitchell, ed., *The Crisis of Campus Sexual Violence: Critical Perspectives on Prevention and Response* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Jon Krakauer, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town, First Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 2015); Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood and Privilege on Campus, Second Edition* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁷¹⁰ John von Rhein, “Oh, *Susannah!* An American Opera of Lust and Moral Superiority Seems Surprisingly Contemporary After 40 Years,” *Chicago Tribune*, 3 October 1993 http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1993-10-03/entertainment/9310030329_1_lyric-opera-american-operas-olin-blitch (accessed 3 May 2017). Nominated by President George H. W. Bush, Clarence Thomas succeeded Thurgood Marshall, becoming the second African American to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States. Anita Hill, an African American lawyer, testified at Thomas’s confirmation hearings that Thomas had sexually harassed her when she worked for him at the Department of Education and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The U.S. Senate ultimately confirmed Thomas’s nomination by a vote of 52-48.

The idea of woman-as-presumed-seducer, ostracized by the male world, remains very relevant, from a political and human stance. Unfortunately, in our world today, we don't have to look too far to see mob psychology in operation.⁷¹¹

Hill became the target of a smear campaign immediately after she testified that Thomas had sexually harassed her. Conservative journalist David Brock, for example, alleged that Hill was “the secret weapon in the war on Clarence Thomas.”⁷¹² He referred to her as “a bit nutty, and a bit slutty,” charging that in addition to being part of a liberal conspiracy, Hill was lying to exact revenge on Thomas for passing her over professionally, and perhaps sexually.⁷¹³ In 2001, Brock admitted that his accusations had been entirely false, explaining that he had done “everything he could to ‘ruin Hill’s credibility,’” employing “‘virtually every derogatory and often contradictory allegation I had collected on Hill into the vituperative mix.’”⁷¹⁴

The Lyric Opera production of *Susannah* used the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings only as a backdrop, yet the company could have taken the relevance of the hearings a bit further. What if, for example, *Susannah* is understood to be an African American woman? It is possible to interpret Floyd's music and libretto in such a way as to directly support this reading. In Act I,

⁷¹¹ Falls, quoted in *ibid.*

⁷¹² See David Brock, “The Real Anita Hill: James Brudney, Jeanne Simon, Roy Meyers, Timothy Phelps, Nina Totenberg, Gail Laster, Terrel Bell, Ricki Seidman, and the Hidden Hand of Judge Susan Hoerchner,” *The American Spectator* 25, no. 3 (March, 1992): 27. Brock's article became the basis for his book by the same title, published the following year: *The Real Anita Hill: The Untold Story* (New York: Free Press, 1993). Two recent films that illuminate just what Anita Hill endured in the 1990s include the 2013 documentary *Anita: Speaking Truth to Power* (indebted to Hill's 1997 book by the same subtitle) and the 2016 television film *Confirmation*, starring Kerry Washington.

⁷¹³ Brock, “The Real Anita Hill,” 27. Brock argued that “although the most popular theory to account for Hill's anti-Thomas feelings is that she had a “fatal attraction” to him, the evidence suggests that his rejection of her was professional, not personal.” He went on to characterize Hill as “a young, ambitious, but not terribly talented woman” who “developed some hard feelings against her boss” (p. 25).

⁷¹⁴ See Alex Kuczynski and William Glaberson, “Book Author Says He Lied in His Attacks on Anita Hill in Bid to Aid Justice Thomas,” *New York Times*, 27 June 2001. Brock further disavowed the premise of *The Real Anita Hill* in his book *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002).

Scene 2, just after she completes “Ain’t it a pretty night,” Susannah and her brother sing and dance to a humorous, light-hearted number called the “Jaybird” song, its text taken from a rhyme Floyd happened to know. Interestingly, this rhyme was first catalogued by the African American chemist and folk-song collector Thomas W. Talley in his 1922 collection *Negro Folk Rhymes*.⁷¹⁵

Talley’s “Jaybird” includes four verses and a chorus. The second verse goes as follows:

Dat Jaybird a-settin’ on a swingin’ lim.’
He wink at me an’ I wink at him.
He laugh at me w’en my gun “crack.”
It kick me down on de flat o’ my back.⁷¹⁶

Floyd’s version of “Jaybird” is comprised of a single repeated stanza, similar to Talley’s second stanza:

“Oh, jaybird sittin’ on a hick’ry limb,
He winked at me and I winked at him.
I picked up a brickbat
An’ hit him on the chin.
‘Looka here, little boy, don’t you do that agin!’”⁷¹⁷

In the opera, Sam sings the stanza first, and then Susannah joins in, repeating it with him (Example 3.10). As Floyd recalled to me in 2015, he knew the “Jaybird” rhyme because his grandfather had recited it to him as a young boy; it always “tickled me,” Floyd noted.⁷¹⁸ He went

⁷¹⁵ Thomas Washington Talley, *Thomas W. Talley’s Negro Folk Rhymes, A New, Expanded Edition, with Music*, edited, with an Introduction and Notes by Charles K. Wolfe, Musical Transcriptions by Bill Ferreira (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 11-13. Talley was a collector of African-American folk songs and a professor of chemistry at Fisk University.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷¹⁷ See Floyd, *Susannah, Libretto*, 10.

⁷¹⁸ Floyd, interview with the author.

on to say that he had decided to incorporate the rhyme, composing his own music, as “the theme-song of the guileless, youthful Susannah.”⁷¹⁹

Example 3.10

Susannah and Sam’s “Jaybird” Song

Scherzando ♩ = 92

Sus. "Oh, jay-bird sit-tin' on a hick' ry limb, He winked at me and I winked at him. I
 Sam. "Oh, jay-bird sit-tin' on a hick' ry limb, He winked at me and I winked at him. I
 picked up a brick-bat an' hit him on the chin. Look-a here, lit - tle boy, don't you do that a- gin!"
 picked up a brick-bat an' hit him on the chin. Look-a here, lit - tle boy, don't you do that a- gin!"

Despite Floyd’s rather benign explanation regarding his inclusion of “Jaybird,” this number, the composer’s only foray into any kind of quotation, might be taken to musically mark Susannah and Sam as racial outsiders. In the opera, “Jaybird” (like “The trees on the mountain,” the other onstage song in the opera) is presented as something of a family song. Susannah begs Sam to sing it to her, imploring:

Don’t go to bed right yet, Sam.
 Sing me the “Jaybird” song first.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid. Talley’s “Jaybird” also includes a melodic transcription. “This,” editor Charles K. Wolfe points out “is one of the few pieces for which Talley provided music in the original edition.” See *Thomas W. Talley’s Negro Folk Rhymes*, 12. Floyd’s melody, however, appears unrelated to the one Talley recorded.

Remember how Pa used to always sing me “Jaybird”
Afore I’d go to bed.
You ain’t sung it fer me in a long time now,
An’ it always makes me feel real happy.⁷²⁰

No one else in the opera ever sings this song as if to suggest a tangible reason for Susannah and Sam’s outsider status in New Hope Valley. The song’s isolation is intriguing, given that Susannah’s two arias permeate across Floyd’s score. “Jaybird” does not. In fact, the “Jaybird” melody appears just twice, first, at the end of Act I, Scene 2, and second, in the following scene when Susannah hums the melody as she bathes in the creek. Thus she is humming the song that potentially marks her as “other” at the moment she is discovered by the Elders, who respond by plotting to run her out of New Hope Valley.⁷²¹

Importantly, such musical revelations are hardly unprecedented on the American musical stage. In Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II’s musical *Showboat* (1927), leading lady Julie La Verne reveals that she is “passing” for white when she sings the song “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man.”⁷²² The ship’s African American cook Queenie overhears Julie singing the song, and she is surprised, noting that she has only ever heard “colored folks” sing this number. One could interpret Susannah’s “Jaybird” as speaking to her racial heritage as well, albeit in a more subtle way than in *Showboat*. Yet if one combs through Floyd’s libretto, one can find additional racial cues.

⁷²⁰ See Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 9.

⁷²¹ In fact, when Little Bat rushes to tell Susannah that she is in trouble, he explains: “They was lookin’ fer a baptism crick and they found it, only you was in it, a-bathin’ naked as a jaybird. They said it were a shameful sight.” Thus, the word “Jaybird” is significant in and of itself. See Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 14.

⁷²² On *Showboat*, see Todd Decker, *Showboat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Another musical that subtly deals with racial ideology is Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II’s *Oklahoma!* (1943). Andrea Most has argued compellingly for a reading of the “outsider” character Jud as “a realistic, unassimilable, and racially characterized (‘dark’) man.” See *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 107.

For example, near the end of Act I, Scene 1, Mrs. McLean, the wife of one of the Valley Elders, asserts that “they’s bad blood in that family,” referring to Susannah and Sam.⁷²³ Later, her son Little Bat repeats this rumor to Susannah:

My ma says they’s bad blood in yo’ fam’ly
But I like to look at you.⁷²⁴

The reference to “bad blood” calls to mind the “one-drop rule,” first an informal rule and later a legal principle asserting that “anyone with any known trace of black blood was considered black,” as sociologist Nikki Khanna writes.⁷²⁵ Near the very end of the opera, as the mob advances on Susannah, one of the Elders warns her:

You’re mockin’ us with yer laughter.
Y’ll regret it, y’ll see,
When yer brother’s caught
An’ strung on a tree.⁷²⁶

The Elder’s words, coupled with Mrs. McLean’s comment about “bad blood” and Susannah and Sam’s song of African American origin, allude to the history of white mob justice and the practice of lynching black men in the South. Thus although Susannah’s racial identity is not *the* story in this opera, it weaves like a subtext throughout Floyd’s plot and language.

This subtext is crucial, for when we allow for the possibility that Susannah could be an African American woman, the opera’s sexual politics take on additional baggage. As historian Estelle B. Freedman has argued, “the history of rape consists in large part in tracking the changing

⁷²³ Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 6.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷²⁵ See Nikki Khanna, “‘If You’re Half Black, You’re Just Black’: Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2010): 98.

⁷²⁶ Floyd, *Susannah*, *Libretto*, 35.

narratives that define which women may charge which men . . . and whose accounts will be believed.”⁷²⁷ Similarly, historian Eugene Genovese notes that prior to the American Civil War, “rape meant, by definition, rape of white women.”⁷²⁸ After the Civil War, African American activists worked incredibly hard to establish that “black women could be victims of rape,” according to Freedman.⁷²⁹ Unfortunately, even in the 1990s, part of Anita Hill’s struggle involved establishing that black women could in fact be victims of sexual harassment. This history of struggle speaks again to the importance of referring to Bitch’s crime as rape, rather than seduction. Anti-seduction laws were put in place during the nineteenth century largely to protect middle-class white women.⁷³⁰ Because they were still property when such laws were established, African American women were never afforded such protection. Moreover, the word seduction, unlike the word rape, underwent no revision in the twentieth century. Thus uncritically characterizing Bitch’s crime as seduction problematically suggests that Susannah must have been a white woman or that Susannah could only be a white woman, playing into another powerful myth of American rape culture.⁷³¹

I offer this brief thought experiment—that is, regarding the implications of reading Susannah as an African American woman—not to fault the Lyric Opera of Chicago’s 1993 production, but instead, to emphasize that *Susannah* is a rich opera that under the right

⁷²⁷ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 3.

⁷²⁸ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 33.

⁷²⁹ Freedman, *Redefining Rape*, 1-2.

⁷³⁰ Freedman covers anti-seduction laws in *Redefining Rape*. See Chapter 2: “The Crime of Seduction.”

⁷³¹ As Helen Benedict pointed out in 1992, racism plays a central role in how sexual violence is perceived in the United States. See *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes*, 9.

circumstances could take on a variety of important real life meanings and contexts. Future producers of *Susannah* would do well to consider what attention to intersectional readings might do to further illuminate Susannah's plight, precisely because this plight speaks to the history and lived experience of numerous people who have struggled in a multitude of ways to be heard and to be believed.⁷³² *Susannah* has the potential to encourage performers and audiences to contemplate the prevalence of acquaintance rape, the long road to recovery afterward, and our continued tendency to doubt and blame the victim, particularly when the victim is marked as "other" in some way.⁷³³ The American Association of Universities' 2015 campus climate survey found that "rates of sexual assault and misconduct are highest among undergraduate females and those identifying as transgender, genderqueer, non-conforming, questioning, and as something not listed on the survey."⁷³⁴ Thus thoughtful productions and discussions of *Susannah* on college campuses might help us to address this painful reality about sexual violence. Encouragingly, when the Meadows School of Music at Southern Methodist University presented *Susannah* in February 2015, Gregory Sullivan Isaacs, one of the few reviewers to explicitly invoke the word "rape" in his synopsis of *Susannah's* plot, admitted: "The opera stuck with me, all the way home."⁷³⁵ Thus while Susannah's fate within the world of the opera appears bleak and uncertain, the heroine's fate in our world

⁷³² Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit writes about both the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that women have and continue to be silenced in our culture, ultimately arguing that the subtle and not-so-subtle are one in the same. See *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 14.

⁷³³ Musicologist Bonnie Gordon recently discussed the importance of courses that engage with music and gender in relation to the so-called rape "crisis" on college campuses. See "Why We Matter," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19 (2015): 116-124.

⁷³⁴ See AAU Campus Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct."

⁷³⁵ Gregory Sullivan Isaacs, "Oh Susannah! Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of Music Presents an Admirable Production of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*," *TheaterJones: North Texas Performing Arts News*, 12 February 2015, <http://www.theaterjones.com/ntx/reviews/20150215121151/2015-02-12/SMU-Meadows-School-of-the-Arts/Susannah> (accessed 3 May 2017).

appears trenchant, indebted to a chorus of soprano voices who continue to advance her (and our) struggle.

A SHORT SEQUEL

Reviving the Operatic Life of Susan B. Anthony in 1976

At the end of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All*, Susan B., now deceased, sings an aria from behind a marble statue of herself. "We cannot retrace our steps," she begins, arpeggiating a melancholy C-minor triad.⁷³⁶ Intriguingly, the orchestra seems to suggest otherwise, immediately retracing her arpeggio (Example S.1). Eventually she asserts more confidently: "But we do not retrace our steps," articulating her words around a D-major triad.⁷³⁷ This time, the orchestra does not follow her (Example S.2). According to the stage directions, as "women place wreaths at the foot of the statue [of Susan B.], and slowly all depart," the orchestra offers up a gentle, hymn-like interlude until finally, Susan B. is alone on stage.⁷³⁸

Example S.1

"We cannot retrace our steps"

Sus. $\text{♩} = 60$
p
We can - not re - trace out steps,
f *p*

⁷³⁶ Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein, *The Mother of Us All, Together with the Scenario by Maurice Grosser, Piano-Vocal Score* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1947), 153.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

Example S.2

“But we do not retrace our steps”

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in the soprano register (Sus.) and features a melodic line with three triplet markings. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) with a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, also featuring triplet markings. The music is in a key signature of one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: "But we do not re - trace our steps,".

“Where is where,” she ponders, “in my long life of effort and strife, dear life, life is strife, in my long life, it will not come and go, I tell you so, it will stay it will pay.”⁷³⁹ Reaching up triumphantly to the word “pay,” she seems to suggest that her struggle is finished, her goal (women’s suffrage) achieved (Example S.3). But then she backtracks, switching from G major to C minor: “But do we want what we have got, has it not gone, what made it live, has it not gone because now it is had, in my long life in my long life.”⁷⁴⁰ After several moments of silence, in a jubilant C major fully supported by the orchestra, she declares dramatically: “Life is strife, I was a martyr all my life not to what I won but to what was done” (Example S.4).⁷⁴¹ Thus she reminds her constituency that her triumph is to be found not solely in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, fourteen years after her death, but rather, in *all* the work she did on behalf of women’s rights. Crucially, she also seems to suggest that the work remains incomplete, urging that her listeners take some responsibility themselves: “Do you know because I tell you so, or do you

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 155-156.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 156-157.

know, do you know. My long life, my long life,” she concludes atop a plagal cadence (Example S.5).⁷⁴²

Example S.3

“It will stay it will pay”



Musical notation for Example S.3, showing a single staff in 4/4 time. The melody is: it (quarter), will (quarter), stay (half), it (quarter), will (quarter), pay (half). Dynamics are *mp* for the first two notes and *mf* for the last three notes. The word "Sus." is written to the left of the staff.

Example S.4

“Life is strife”



Musical notation for Example S.4, showing a vocal line and piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The vocal line has the lyrics "Life is strife,". Dynamics are *ff* for the vocal line and *fff* for the piano accompaniment. The word "Sus." is written to the left of the vocal staff.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 157.

Example S.5

“My long life”

The musical score consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and includes the lyrics: "My long life, my long life." The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *p*, *un poco*, and *pp possibile*. It also features a "Slow Curtain" section with a triplet of three bars and a "una corda" section. The score concludes with "fine".

In the 1940s, two writers who responded to *The Mother of Us All* focused in particular on the opera’s conclusion. A reviewer for *Music & Letters* found Thomson’s score perplexing:

Virgil Thomson’s music, which, as the work of a highly sophisticated composer and a mordant, witty and exacting critic, shows a baldness and ingenuousness that can only be understood as being due to a sort of affectation.⁷⁴³

“Is it all a joke on Mr. Thomson’s part?” the reviewer wondered before continuing:

One must in charity suppose so on looking at such a thing as the closing cadence, which has to be seen on the last page of the score if one is to believe any composer who knows his craft capable of anything so crudely and clumsily ineffectual as a plagal cadence in which the voice, held over four plain, subdominant chords, trails down to a median without orchestral support of any kind and is followed by three silent bars while the slow curtain descends, with a common tonic chord creeping in like a shame-faced latecomer.⁷⁴⁴

⁷⁴³ E.B., “Thomson, Virgil, *The Mother of Us All*. Opera. Libretto by Gertrude Stein. (Music Press, Inc., New York.) Vocal Score,” *Music & Letters* 29, no. 2 (April 1948): 223.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

On the other hand, Henry Cowell, a composer and ardent supporter of new music, applauded *The Mother of Us All*, marveling at the closing cadence:

The 'Amen' suggested by Thomson's plagal cadence is the more moving because much that Stein wrote of Susan B. in this piece, finished only a few weeks before she died, she might easily have written of herself.⁷⁴⁵

Cowell's words offer more than a hint of the biographical readings of *The Mother of Us All* to come.

Cowell also attested to the "tragedy" of the opera:

It is the tragedy of life-long devotion at hard labor to causes soon forgotten through being won, and which once won are found not to produce the hoped for, all-encompassing good they seemed to promise while the deeply serious struggle was on.⁷⁴⁶

Cowell's words allude to the nature of the feminist enterprise, a series of struggles, yet unfinished, to reach gender equity, and in this sense, the plagal cadence was perhaps a most fitting conclusion. Listeners have been trained to hear the perfect authentic cadence as "the most final sounding of all cadences," according to music theorists Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne.⁷⁴⁷ Thus the plagal cadence offers the possibility of an afterlife, of something yet to come, reflecting compellingly on Susan B.'s unfinished struggle.

In the Prequel to this dissertation, I examined *The Mother of Us All's* beginnings, tracing the opera through its genesis and premiere at Columbia University in 1947, the year that marked the United States' entry into the Cold War. In 1976, the Santa Fe Opera revived *The Mother of Us All*,

⁷⁴⁵Henry Cowell, "Review: Virgil Thomson: *The Mother of Us All*, an Opera. Text by Gertrude Stein. New York: Music Press, Inc., 1947. [157 p., \$10.00; special edition, \$25.00]," *Notes* 5, no. 2 (1948): 261.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷⁴⁷ Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne, *Tonal Harmony, With an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music, Fifth Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 147. See also Steven G. Laitz, *The Complete Musician: An Integrated Approach to Tonal Theory, Analysis, and Listening, Third Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 239. Laitz writes that "the plagal cadence is much weaker than the authentic cadence because the motion of IV to I is not nearly as goal directed as the motion from V to I heard in the authentic cadence."

celebrating simultaneously the company's twentieth anniversary and the nation's bicentennial with that "truly American" operatic heroine, Susan B.⁷⁴⁸ Santa Fe touted all things national in the numerous press releases leading up to the revival, praising the opera's subject matter, Thomson's tuneful score, Stein's status in *American Letters*, the all-American cast of singers, and the brightly colored costumes and sets designed by American Pop artist Robert Indiana, best known for the iconic *LOVE* image.⁷⁴⁹ The Santa Fe Opera spared no excess as they refashioned *The Mother of Us All* into a gigantic, open-air celebration of America complete with parades, large floats careening across the stage, and some of the singers on roller skates. Santa Fe's revival shows how the meaning of *The Mother of Us All* shifted along with the progress of the modern feminist movement and a new nationalist agenda, in many ways leaving behind the circumstances of its genesis and premiere – a commission from an American university some 2,000 miles away and twenty-nine years prior.

At Santa Fe, moreover, the anxieties and ironies that had initially informed *The Mother of Us All*, particularly with regard to the status of women and the institution of marriage following World War II, were almost completely supplanted by the jubilant grafting together of nationalism and feminism. Despite Susan B.'s admonition that "life is strife," it was as though feminism, now in its "second wave," had triumphed. Most second-wave feminists, however, would likely have argued that their work was not complete, that feminism had yet to triumph. Certainly feminism

⁷⁴⁸ "The Mother of Us All Opens On August 7 At Santa Fe," Press Release, Anke Kempter, Santa Fe Opera, 3 August 1976, Santa Fe Opera Archives (SFOA).

⁷⁴⁹ Robert Indiana initially created *LOVE* for the Museum of Modern Art's 1965 Christmas card. As art historian Barbara Haskell argues, "Indiana's *LOVE* appeared just as the counterculture's admonition to 'make love not war' was garnering widespread media attention, and the work instantly became a talisman of the pacifism and sexual freedom associated with the cultural revolution and was reproduced in newspapers, magazines, and on television sets around the country." See "Robert Indiana: The American Dream," in *Robert Indiana: Beyond Love*, edited by Barbara Haskell (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013), 104-105. For more on Indiana's life and work, see Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Robert Indiana: Figures of Speech* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

had yet to become one with American nationalism. At least one woman resisted Santa Fe's attempt to subsume the feminist cause, and she asserted her voice in the open-air lobby just outside the theater area, campaigning for a continued commitment to women's rights. In what follows, I show how *The Mother of Us All* evolved in the years separating 1947 and 1976, and I illuminate some of the complexities and contradictions of that evolution.

After *The Mother of Us All's* premiere in Columbia University's Brander Matthews Theater on 7 May 1947, the opera remained largely confined to the college and university circuit. Thus at first glance, Santa Fe's decision to return to Thomson and Stein's little-known "university" opera might seem surprising, yet the decision speaks to Santa Fe's history and mission. Founded in 1956 by American conductor John Crosby (1926-2002), the Santa Fe Opera quickly established itself as the premier summer opera festival in the United States. A night at the Santa Fe Opera made for a magical experience; attendees sat in an open-air theater showcasing not only the opera on stage but also the vast New Mexico sky above and the desert and mountains beyond. From the very beginning, the Santa Fe Opera prided itself on its productions of canonic operatic repertoire as well as its introductions of new and lesser-known works.⁷⁵⁰ The company also emphasized the fact that they were giving American singers the opportunity to learn and perform new roles in an immersive environment.⁷⁵¹ Interestingly, Santa Fe's aspirations were not unlike those of the opera

⁷⁵⁰ Erick Neher outlines "Santa Fe's formula" as follows: "to mix a few conventional works with carefully selected unconventional repertory: world premieres, twentieth-century rarities, and neglected pieces by major composers." See "Summer Opera in Santa Fe," *The Hudson Review* 65, no. 3 (2012): 486.

⁷⁵¹ This ties into the company's current mission, articulated on its website: "The Santa Fe Opera's mission is to advance the operatic art form by presenting ensemble performances of the highest quality in a unique setting with a varied repertoire of new, rarely performed, and standard works; to ensure the excellence of opera's future through apprentice programs for singers, technicians and arts administrators; and to foster and enrich an understanding and appreciation of opera among a diverse public." See "Our Mission," Santa Fe Opera <https://www.santafeopera.org/about-us/overview/our-mission> (accessed 2 May 2017).

program at Columbia University. This was not exactly a coincidence, for Crosby had studied at Columbia, participating in the Opera Workshop there in 1952 and 1953.⁷⁵² Just as Douglas Moore sought to secure a place for American opera within the American university during the 1940s and 1950s, Crosby sought to expand that place, and as he did, he occasionally turned to works that Columbia had championed.

On 3 May 1976, the Santa Fe Opera trumpeted that their “star spangled production” would bring “together three famous Americans”: Anthony, Stein, and Thomson.⁷⁵³ Santa Fe found other national credentials to boast as well. On 3 August, they advertised their “all-American cast of singers . . . headed by mezzo-soprano Mignon Dunn . . . a Metropolitan Opera star . . . equally at home on the stage of other major American and European opera houses.”⁷⁵⁴ Dunn had made her name singing Wagner and Verdi roles, and according to the release, the role of Susan B. marked “a new venture into American opera for her.”⁷⁵⁵ The company concluded its spotlight on Dunn by quoting the singer’s comparison of Susan B. with Brünnhilde, thus coupling Susan B. to another national operatic heroine.

The Santa Fe Opera also singled out Robert Indiana’s contributions, describing his costumes and sets in great detail: “bright colors, reds, blues and yellows, flags, bunting and sashes

⁷⁵² See Craig A. Smith, *A Vision of Voices: John Crosby and the Santa Fe Opera* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 32.

⁷⁵³ “BI-CENTENNIAL OPERA AT THE SANTA FE OPERA,” Press Release, Anke Kempter, Santa Fe Opera, 3 May 1976, SFOA.

⁷⁵⁴ “THE MOTHER OF US ALL OPENS ON AUGUST 7 AT SANTA FE,” Press Release, Anke Kempter, Santa Fe Opera, 3 August 1976, SFOA.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

for each character with their name on them.”⁷⁵⁶ The company advertised the affinities between Indiana’s work as a visual artist and Thomson’s work as a composer, quoting Indiana as saying:

I’ve known Virgil’s work most of my life . . . but it was in 1964 that I realized that everyone [sic] of my paintings dealt with a theme that was related to Virgil Thomson’s music.⁷⁵⁷

Leslie Atkins Durham has suggested that “the theme that Indiana and Thomson shared was a kind of folk-inspired American-ness.”⁷⁵⁸ She asserts that “like Thomson, and Pop artists in general, Indiana appropriated the ‘scraps, patches, and rags’ of everyday American consumer life.”⁷⁵⁹

Durham fails to precisely pinpoint how Thomson’s music might be heard as an appropriation of ‘scraps, patches, and rags,’ but she may have been responding to the way in which Thomson’s music, despite being largely of his own invention, sounds like a patchwork of musical quotations.

Moreover, both Thomson and Indiana hailed from the American heartland, Kansas City, Missouri, and New Castle, Indiana, respectively. Born Robert Clark, Indiana eventually took his home state as his last name, proudly advertising his Midwestern heritage. This too might help to explain why he felt such an affinity towards Thomson, whom Joseph Horowitz once described as “an American original” with a “Midwestern pedigree.”⁷⁶⁰

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁷ Robert Indiana, quoted in *ibid.*

⁷⁵⁸ Leslie Atkins Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein: Absence, Culture, and the Landscape of American Alternative Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 105.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷⁶⁰ See Joseph Horowitz, “Introduction: An American Original” in *The Virgil Thomson Centenary, 1896-1996*, edited by Joseph Horowitz, publication made possible by the Virgil Thomson Foundation and other sponsors, 2. During the 1930s, Thomson wrote music for *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937). Both of these documentaries were funded by the US government and intended to raise awareness about the New Deal. *The Plow that Broke the Plains* focused on how uncontrolled agricultural farming had led to the Dust Bowl, while *The River* emphasized the importance of the Mississippi River. Thomson’s participation in these films likely contributed to perceptions of him as a composer who understood and respected the heartland.

In the case of British director Peter Wood and British conductor Raymond Leppard, the Santa Fe Opera had to be a little more creative in asserting the national nature of their bicentennial project. The company could only point out that Wood claimed he was “crazy about Gertrude Stein’s works,” having “read everything she’s written.”⁷⁶¹ Santa Fe emphasized that Leppard, however, was in the process of becoming an American citizen. The company’s August press release included these words from Leppard:

I like America enough to come and live here . . . My decision to emigrate was a contributory reason for doing THE MOTHER OF US ALL.⁷⁶²

Santa Fe thus tried to forge a link between Leppard’s path to citizenship and the opera he was about to conduct. At a later moment in time, Leppard wrote quite disparagingly of *The Mother of Us All*, calling it “a strange opera” and commenting on “the improbability of the subject . . . a heroine of women’s lib in America.”⁷⁶³ Leppard also recalled that when Thomson voiced his surprise that Crosby had “hire[d] two Englishmen to put on an opera about America,” he had responded smugly:

‘You forget, Mr. Thomson, that without Englishmen there would never have been an America to write an opera about.’⁷⁶⁴

He concluded his reminiscence on *The Mother* by stating that his and Wood’s “brilliant production . . . made up for the work’s deficiencies, turning them into a dazzling piece of stagecraft.”⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶¹ Peter Wood, quoted in “THE MOTHER OF US ALL OPENS.”

⁷⁶² Raymond Leppard, quoted in *ibid.*

⁷⁶³ Raymond Leppard, *Music Made Me, Foreword by HRH The Prince of Wales* (Leicester: Matador, 2010), 208.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

Putting the derogatory aspects of Leppard's commentary aside, his description of the Santa Fe's *Mother* as "a dazzling piece of stagecraft" would seem to corroborate and further illuminate the celebratory purpose of the 1976 revival. In fact, Leppard and Wood even took liberties with Thomson's score to achieve their larger-than-life production. Leppard recalled telephoning Thomson "to ask permission to compile a brief overture" for the opera, because Wood "wanted to start the opera with a patriotic parade instead of its original, rather limp beginning."⁷⁶⁶ The "limp beginning" to which Leppard was referring was Virgil T. and Gertrude S.'s opening narration, set in Susan B.'s sitting room. As I have shown, this narration was likely quite purposeful, as it positions Stein and Thomson's artistic partnership so that it mirrors Susan B. and Anne's political partnership. Importantly, it also establishes Stein's voice as the vessel through which we are granted access to Susan B. Anthony. In any case, in 1976, Thomson agreed to the addition of an overture, and Leppard put one together, culling from other parts of Thomson's score. Characterized by an almost raucous trumpet and plenty of snare drum, Leppard's overture, preserved on Santa Fe's recording of *The Mother of Us All*, suited the tenor of the opening parade in Santa Fe, as all of the characters marched onto the stage, decked out in their lavish costumes, waving signs and banners, names splashed across their sashes.⁷⁶⁷

The unabashed flag waving of the Santa Fe parade, however, contrasts sharply with the seemingly satirical nature of the parades that Thomson and Stein included in the 1947 score. For example, in 1947, the first parade occurred a few moments into Act I, Scene 2, when a group of

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., 208.

⁷⁶⁷ See Virgil Thomson, *The Mother of Us All*, Santa Fe Opera, conducted by Raymond Leppard, New World Records 288/289-2, 1977, CD. In 2013, the Manhattan School of Music revived and recorded the *The Mother of Us All*. Their recording conforms more closely to the 1947 score. See Virgil Thomson, *The Mother of Us All and The Mother of Us All Suite*, Manhattan School of Music Opera Theater, conducted by Steven Osgood, Albany Records, 2014, CD.

men including Daniel Webster, John Adams, Andrew Johnson, Thaddeus Stevens, and Anthony Comstock march across the stage, following banners that read “Vote” and “The Vote”; the politicians are trailed by the characters Jo the Loiterer and Chris the Citizen, who according to Thomson’s stage directions, “pretend to play fife and drum.”⁷⁶⁸ This parade is absurd, for the men aligning themselves with the banners of progressivism are the very men who stand in Susan B.’s way as she fights for women’s suffrage in the opera. Thus, the parades of 1947 appeared positioned to critique the nation, whereas the parades of 1976 seemed only to celebrate it.

Leslie Atkins Durham has argued that Santa Fe’s lavish production “concealed the subversive potential of Stein’s words and ideas.”⁷⁶⁹ Oddly, Durham assigned much of the blame to Thomson. For example, she complained about Thomson’s “hyper-patriotic score,” asserting:

The coerciveness of folk music and patriotic tunes in drawing people into a circle of identification of national unity was, I think, running contrary to what seems to be the agenda of the libretto as discernible on the page.⁷⁷⁰

While I agree that to a certain extent, the Santa Fe production anesthetized the subversive potential of *The Mother of Us All*, I am not convinced that Thomson’s score ran contrary to Stein’s agenda. As I suggested in the Prequel to this dissertation, Thomson may have revised Stein’s libretto and composed his score to put himself in support of Stein’s agenda. One must remember, moreover, that Stein wrote her libretto explicitly for Thomson, with whom she had collaborated previously and whose signature style was hardly a secret. I maintain that the seemingly unexamined

⁷⁶⁸ Thomson and Stein, *The Mother of Us All*, 33.

⁷⁶⁹ Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein*, 101. Noting that Santa Fe could have used *The Mother of Us All* to comment on the contradictions still present in American politics, she wistfully suggested that Santa Fe might have attempted “to stage the complexities that imbued bicentennial celebrations—that a nation still reeling from the disasters of Watergate and Vietnam was at the very least skeptical about what it could and ought to be celebrating in 1976.”

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 101, 104.

patriotism of the 1976 production had little to do with Thomson and everything to do with the decisions made by the Santa Fe directional staff as they sought to transform *The Mother of Us All* from a small-scale college opera into a veritable national monument of an opera.⁷⁷¹

Yet as it happened, not even the Santa Fe Opera or the excitement surrounding the American bicentennial in the midst of Cold War détente quite succeeded in supplanting *The Mother's* revolutionary or subversive potential.⁷⁷² In the archives of the Santa Fe Opera, there exists a documentary of the 1976 season, preserved on a VHS tape.⁷⁷³ This documentary captured footage relevant to the preparation and performance of *The Mother of Us All*, including, according to the documentary's narrator, "a young New Yorker standing for local office back home" as she commandeered "the open-air terrace for an impromptu piece of electioneering on the women's lib ticket" on opening night.⁷⁷⁴ The woman can be heard asserting: "Sisters, the boot may still be on our necks, but the foot in the boot is trembling now."⁷⁷⁵ The camera pans away for a moment and then returns to the woman as she continues:

Today we demand them. Tomorrow, we neither ask nor demand. We take them, we take our rights. The hand that rocks the cradle will rock the world!⁷⁷⁶

⁷⁷¹ Even the briefest of comparisons between the photographs from the Santa Fe revival and the photographs from the Columbia premiere attests to the transformational nature of the 1976 production. See photographs in "Folder 141: The Mother of Us All, 1976," SFOA. See photographs in "The Mother of Us All," Columbia Theater Associates, 1893-1958, Box 4, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

⁷⁷² On the celebrations of the American Bicentennial, see Michael J. Devine, "The Bicentennial as History: What Have We Learned from Celebrations of the Bicentennial of the American Revolution?," *History News* 41, no. 6 (1986): 8-14.

⁷⁷³ *Santa Fe Opera 1976 Season Documentary*, funded by Public Television Stations, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Ford Foundation, made by WNET, dated 5/11/78, housed in the SFOA. I watched this documentary while working in the Santa Fe Opera Archives in August 2015. No longer commercially available, it is not clear that this documentary ever actually aired on WNET.

⁷⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.* "The hand that rocks the cradle will rock the world" may have been a reference to Marc Blitzstein's 1937 musical *The Cradle Will Rock*.

As she delivers this last line, the crowd that has gathered around her begins to laugh. Joan Downs, who reported on *The Mother of Us All* for *Time* magazine described the occasion:

The first-night audience, filing out of the opera house after the performance, was treated to an impromptu epilogue. A young woman in the crowd sprang up on the fountain and before long her voice was resonating across the plaza proclaiming modern woman's plight. Her speech lacked both the wit and charm of Gertrude S. and Virgil T. But it was a spunky gesture, very much in keeping with the crusading spirit of Susan B.⁷⁷⁷

The crowd's reaction to the New Yorker's speech, however, calls to mind Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr's adage that the more things change, the more things stay the same. Susan B. Anthony was also a young woman from New York. She was also written off, laughed at, and ridiculed as she fought for the rights and values she held dear. Arguably, to dismiss the New Yorker in 1976, as the ill-fated Equal Rights Amendment languished, awaiting ratification, was to dismiss Anthony's own struggle, as presented by Thomson and Stein. First drafted by Alice Paul (1885-1977) in 1923, just three years after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, the Equal Rights Amendment was intended to address the fact that voting rights alone would not ensure that men and women were treated equally.⁷⁷⁸ Like the New Yorker agitating from the fountain in 1976, Thomson and Stein's Susan B., heard from beyond the grave at the end of *The Mother of Us All*, seemed to recognize this reality, pondering the precise gains of her struggle for women's suffrage and thus suggesting the need for continued commitment to and improvement upon the feminist cause.

⁷⁷⁷ Joan Downs, "An American Momma," *Time*, 23 August 1976, p. 37.

⁷⁷⁸ On the Equal Rights Amendment, see Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism Between the Wars* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981).

Santa Fe's 1976 revival thus demonstrates one of the central questions looming behind what the company referred to as an "intensely" American work.⁷⁷⁹ In many ways, *The Mother of Us All* must have seemed an ideal candidate for the American bicentennial. A depiction of progress, it was an opera about America, by Americans. As an added bonus, one of those Americans was a woman. Yet such a flattened description ignores the fact that Stein spent most of her career outside the United States, a country that she found less than hospitable, both on a personal and professional level. When Stein moved to Paris in 1903, she found a community of like-minded artists and thinkers and a lifelong partner in Alice B. Toklas, and she remained in Paris until her death in 1946, approximately one year before *The Mother of Us All* had its premiere.

As Jane Palatini Bowers has argued, Stein must have seen herself in Susan B. Anthony. According to Bowers, Anthony "resisted her biological destiny—never marrying, never having children—much like Gertrude Stein herself;" thus, both women might be construed as the "metaphorical mother of us all."⁷⁸⁰ We might push back against Bowers's insistence on "biological destiny," for as feminist writer Rebecca Solnit would likely point out, it suggests that there is "only one proper way for a woman to live."⁷⁸¹ In addition, it is far more significant to note the fact that the Susan B. Stein helped to bring to operatic life in 1947 was ambivalent about the demands of the nation and the demands of biological motherhood, particularly when intertwined because Stein, like plenty of other women, was ambivalent. *The Mother of Us All* was and is an opera about America but what and whose America? The voices competing to be heard at Santa Fe's 1976

⁷⁷⁹ "THE MOTHER OF US ALL," Press Release, Anke Kempter, Santa Fe Opera, 11 November 1975, SFOA.

⁷⁸⁰ Bowers, "They Watch Me as They Watch This," 109.

⁷⁸¹ See Rebecca Solnit, "The Mother of All Questions" in *The Mother of All Questions* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 5.

revival demonstrate that twenty-nine years after the opera's premiere, that question remained unanswered.

CONCLUSION

After the Cold War: “Life is Strife” Continued

In 1999, playwright Carolyn Gage (b. 1952) published *Battered on Broadway: A Vendetta in One Act*.⁷⁸² According to the synopsis:

Nellie Forbush of *South Pacific* is in Mame’s Manhattan penthouse to host a benefit luncheon for a Broadway Battered Women’s Shelter. Her guests include Bess of *Porgy and Bess*, Julie Jordan of *Carousel*, Sally Bowles of *Cabaret*, Mei Li from *Flower Drum Song*, Maria from *West Side Story*, and Aldonza from *Man of La Mancha*. These women, most of them now in their sixties, look back in horror on their various onstage rapes, batterings, and partnerings with inferior men.

Orphan Annie puts in an unexpected appearance and is outraged to discover that Daddy Warbucks has donated the money to buy the building for the shelter. She tells Nellie that when the reporters arrive, she will expose him as a child molester. Nellie is concerned that this will jeopardize the project. She threatens to have Annie arrested if she doesn’t leave. Sally Bowles intervenes, and Annie is in for a surprise when the nun reveals her secret identity and initiates Annie into the mysteries of an underground men-killing vigilante group.⁷⁸³

With *Battered on Broadway*, Gage gave the heroines of a number of mid-twentieth-century Broadway musicals the opportunity to reflect on their pasts and even to seek revenge. As Gage explained in her introduction to the play, she herself wanted to take “revenge on the book-writers of the mainstream Broadway musicals who, for decades, have been celebrating the subordination of women—romanticizing dominance and glamorizing sexual violence.”⁷⁸⁴ Gage’s objections recall

⁷⁸² See Carolyn Gage, “Battered on Broadway: A Vendetta in One Act” in *Nine Short Plays* (Gage Press: 2009), 147-167. I am grateful to playwright and professor Rebecca Howard for bringing this play to my attention.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷⁸⁴ Gage, “Introduction” to *Nine Short Plays*, xvii.

those voiced by Catherine Clément (with respect to opera) in the late 1970s.⁷⁸⁵ Gage, however, went about her task as an artist, rather than as a philosopher.

As she put it, she began her play “with a fantasy of ‘What if the female lead characters of all the old musicals grew up and got together for some consciousness-raising?’”⁷⁸⁶ This approach helped her to write a work “that allowed the audience to take a second look at these familiar characters, through a contemporary feminist lens . . . to look at the racism, the classism, the misogyny, and the adultism that are so taken for granted in mainstream musicals.”⁷⁸⁷ Importantly, Gage “also wanted to tell a story about middle-class, white feminists who attempt coalition with working-class women and women-of-color.”⁷⁸⁸ For example, she noted how some of the women “who are involved in fundraising for the shelter find themselves deferring to Nellie’s autocratic style of leadership, for the sake of her access to privilege.”⁷⁸⁹ The vigilantes, however, “are not confronted with these kinds of conflicts-of-interest, because they work outside the system.”⁷⁹⁰ In *Battered on Broadway*, Gage sought to come to terms with and dismantle Broadway’s patriarchy, taking care to draw attention to the pitfalls that might cause Broadway’s heroines to simply replicate patriarchal structures.

⁷⁸⁵ See Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing, with a foreword by Susan McClary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

⁷⁸⁶ Gage, “Introduction” to *Nine Short Plays*, xvii.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

In 2026, the United States will celebrate its two-hundred fiftieth anniversary. Inspired by Gage's *Battered on Broadway*, I propose that we imagine returning to Santa Fe, the site of *The Mother of Us All's* bicentennial revival and envision another operatic celebration, ten years into the future. What if Santa Fe opted not to celebrate a single American opera, and if instead, they put on a gala concert, featuring arias from a number of different American operas in an effort to acknowledge the multiplicity of the American experience, as well as the varied contributions to the genre of American opera? Santa Fe would have plenty of arias to choose from, yet many would likely be drawn from operas from the mid-twentieth century because from approximately 1945-1965, American opera experienced unparalleled popularity, fueling the composition of numerous new works. Thus we could expect women such as Susan B., Magda, Susannah, and Lizzie to make appearances at Santa Fe's gala concert, offering insights into nationalism and feminism at the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. What operatic excerpts would these heroines sing, and what might their performances tell us?

Let's begin with Magda and Lizzie, both of whom perform tour-de-force mad scenes in their respective operas. On one hand, it would make sense for Magda and Lizzie to reprise these scenes in the 2026 gala concert. Operatic mad scenes have a long and storied history, and in the context of *The Consul* and *Lizzie Borden*, these scenes represent emotional climaxes and even historic moments. Indeed, when Patricia Neway died in 2012, journalists recalled how her rendition of Magda's "To this we've come" routinely "brought down the house" in 1950.⁷⁹¹ Apart from their

⁷⁹¹ For example, as *New York Times* writer Margalit Fox wrote: "It was as Magda in "The Consul" that she made her reputation . . . As was widely reported, Ms. Neway's long aria, "To This We've Come," sung in Act 2 as Magda rages against the consul's secretary, brought down the house nearly every night." See "Patricia Neway, Operatic Soprano Who Won a Tony, Dies at 92," *New York Times*, 1 February 2012.

mad scenes, moreover, Magda and Lizzie hardly ever sing by themselves in *The Consul* or *Lizzie Borden*. Thus if not these scenes, what excerpted numbers would Magda and Lizzie sing? Yet there seems to be something regressive about having two women in 2026 sing numbers that ultimately served such decidedly xenophobic and sexist agendas in the 1950s and 1960s. In the case of Magda, her mad scene rendered European women and by extension, the European continent, desperate, crazy, and powerless. In the case of Lizzie, her mad scene justified why she would go on to commit such a violent and unladylike act as murder. Furthermore, the scene set her up to become the portrait of the jealous and consequently, man-hating and crazy feminist, intent on destroying the family.

Rather than have Magda and Lizzie perform separately, I would propose that the two heroines sing together, repurposing the beginning of Magda's "To this we've come" to reflect on the twenty-first century. As I discussed in Chapter 1, in *The Consul*, Magda begins "To this we've come" after the Secretary scolds her for her outbursts in the Consulate (Example C.1). Magda tries to pull herself together and explain, yet again, just why she is so distraught. This is the aria that causes the Secretary to relent momentarily. When Magda finishes her plea, the Secretary reassures her that she may speak to the Consul, but unfortunately, this requires an appointment, which requires yet another form with Magda's signature. By this point in the opera, Magda has had it with the Secretary's forms, and she continues into the climax of her mad scene, hurling the Secretary's papers about the room before singing her final emotional outpouring.⁷⁹² However, if Magda and Lizzie sang the A section of "To this we've come" together, truncating their version

⁷⁹² Magda's final emotional outpouring is "Oh! The Day Will Come."

before Magda's overwhelming agitation ("Tell me Secretary, tell me"), the aria could take on new meaning.

Magda might begin, singing those opening lines that refer to the sorry state of affairs in the world:

To this we've come:
that men withhold the world from men.
No ship nor shore for him who drowns at sea.
No home nor grave for him who dies on land.⁷⁹³

Yet in 2026, Magda might amend Menotti's words ever so slightly:

To this we've come:
that men withhold the world from us.
No ship nor shore for she who drowns at sea.
No home nor grave for she who dies on land.

Then Lizzie might take over, beginning with the second phrase:

To this we've come
That man be born a stranger upon God's earth,
That he be chosen without a chance for choice,
That he be hunted without the hope of refuge.⁷⁹⁴

Yet Lizzie could also change Menotti's text:

To this we've come
That she be born a stranger upon God's earth,
That she be chosen without a chance for choice,
That she be hunted without the hope of refuge.

Together, they would conclude with that bitter warning:

To this we've come
To this we've come;
And you, you, too, shall weep.⁷⁹⁵

⁷⁹³ Gian-Carlo Menotti, *The Consul: Musical Drama in Three Acts, Libretto* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1950), 41.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

Example C.1

“To this we’ve come”

Adagio ma non troppo

Magda

To this we've come: that men with-hold the world from men. No ship nor shore for him who drowns at sea. No home nor Grave for him who dies on land. To this we've come: that man be born a stran-ger up-on God'searth, that he be cho - sen with-out a chance for choice, that he be hunt - ed with-out the hope of

p *mp*

poco rit. *a tempo*

mf *f*

p *f*

Example C.1 (Continued)

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece. The top system is for the character Magda, with lyrics: "ref - uge. To this we've come, to". The tempo markings are *poco accel.* and *a tempo*. The piano accompaniment below features chords and a melodic line with markings *cresc. e poco accel.* and *ff a tempo*. The bottom system continues the lyrics: "this we've come; and you, you, too, shall weep." with a *rit.* marking. The piano accompaniment continues with chords and a melodic line, also marked *rit.*

Magda and Lizzie’s collective rendition of “To this we’ve come” provides a condensed version of their struggles within their respective operas. With her opening phrase, Magda suggests that when “men withhold the world,” women suffer. In addition, women suffer when their bodies are commandeered by the nation and used to further national mythologies like the nuclear American family of the 1950s. With the words “that she be chosen without a chance for choice, that she be hunted without the hope of refuge,” Lizzie reflects on both her and Magda’s lack of opportunities. Menotti and Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie molded Magda and Lizzie into women who seemingly have no option but to descend into madness. Both are “hunted without the hope of refuge,” Magda by two uncompromising political systems and Lizzie by the fact that Beeson, Plant, and Elmslie bought into her guilt despite definitive evidence. Both women are portrayed as broken, and in “To this we’ve come,” they take stock of their situations. We might thus look beyond the worlds of *The Consul* and *Lizzie Borden* and take stock of the present moment. In 2026,

what choices do women have? What assumptions do we make about them? What are their hopes of refuge? To what have we come?

Imagine, then, that Susannah were to step into the spotlight on stage. What would Susannah say? We would expect Susannah to sing at least one of her famous arias, “Ain’t it a pretty night?” or “The trees on the mountains.” Yet as Catherine Clément might argue, “Ain’t it a pretty night” serves to a certain extent to gloss over the violence of Floyd’s opera. Its singular popularity as a recital piece, moreover, has contributed to the notion of *Susannah* as an homage to the United States, an operatic “national anthem,” rather than the story of a woman forced to endure slander and rape.⁷⁹⁶ Thus in 2026, I would prefer that Susannah forgo “Ain’t it a pretty night,” showcasing instead the “Jaybird” song, “The trees on the mountains,” and concluding with what I have termed her siren song, “Come on over, Little Bat.”

As I argued in Chapter 3, the “Jaybird” song may speak to Susannah’s racial heritage. In Floyd’s opera, no one other than Susannah or Sam ever sings this song—which Susannah claims to have inherited from her father—its text drawn from the African American folk tradition. Thus the song suggests a tangible reason for Susannah and Sam’s outsider status in New Hope Valley. Their outsider status is important for it marks Susannah as an easier target for abuse. Like the “Jaybird” song, “The trees on the mountains” and “Come on over” are onstage songs. Like the “Jaybird” song, moreover, “The trees on the mountains” is a family song. Susannah recalls listening to her mother sing it to her. When Susannah sings “The trees on the mountains,” Bitch hears it, and soprano Phyllis Treigle has suggested that Bitch “hears” the resignation in Susannah’s voice.⁷⁹⁷

⁷⁹⁶ See Thomas Holliday, *Falling Up: The Days and Nights of Carlisle Floyd, The Authorized Biography, With a Foreword by Plácido Domingo* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), xx.

⁷⁹⁷ Phyllis Treigle, email correspondence with the author, 19 March 2015.

Thus when he rapes her, he takes advantage of her vulnerability and of the song that was supposed to serve as a comfort to her. When Susannah sings “Come on over,” she takes back her voice and her right to sing. Little Bat hears Susannah’s song, but when he tries, like Bitch, to take advantage of her, Susannah fights back, slapping him across the face.

Susannah’s conclusion, however, is not entirely triumphant. Despite the fact that she is able to stand up for herself, Susannah is scarred by what she has been forced to endure. She no longer sings her family’s songs. Instead, she fashions a new song for herself. As Carlisle Floyd recalled, according to Phyllis Curtin, the heroine’s future was likely to be one of isolation.⁷⁹⁸ Curtin suggested that Susannah’s destiny was to become “a pine tree,” as though alluding to Susannah’s new predicament, a woman alone on her hillside property, ostracized from her community, singing her own song.⁷⁹⁹ As with “To this we’ve come,” we might reflect on the relevance of the “Jaybird” song, “The trees on the mountains,” and “Come on over, Little Bat” in 2026. How do we continue to traumatize and ostracize rape victims? How do we continue to silence rape victims’ voices for the good of our community and/or national narratives? How do we continue to excuse rapists’ crimes?

After Susannah’s performance, I would want to hear Susan B. sing her final aria from *The Mother of Us All*, for Susan B.’s mantra that “life is strife” embodies not only her own experience, but also Magda’s, Susannah’s, and Lizzie’s experiences. Indeed, looking back at the American women (real and operatic) who after World War II found themselves entangled in a web of global Cold War politics that had implications for domestic gender politics and early feminist politics, Susan B.’s words near the end of *The Mother of Us All* take on almost prophetic significance. If we

⁷⁹⁸ Carlisle Floyd, interview with the author, Tallahassee, Florida, 19 May 2015.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid.

think of Susan B. as an ironic heroine-commentator on the achievements of the Women's Suffrage Movement on the eve of the Cold War and the modern feminist movement, her observation that "life is strife," could not have rung more true—not as a statement of exhaustion or defeat, but rather, as a rallying cry that continues to be relevant in the twenty-first century.

Table 3.1

Professional Productions of *Susannah* in the United States, 1956-2017⁸⁰⁰

Year	Company
1956	New York City Opera (NYCO)
1957	NYCO
1957	Montalvo Summer Music Festival (Los Gatos, California)
1958	NYCO
1958	Karamu Theatre (Cleveland, Ohio)
1959	NYCO
1959	Cincinnati Opera (Ohio)
1960	NYCO
1961	Spartanburg Music Festival (South Carolina)
1962	New Orleans Opera (Louisiana)
1963	NYCO
1964	San Francisco Opera (California)
1964	Cincinnati Opera
1965	NYCO
1965	Metropolitan Opera National Company
1966	New Orleans Opera
1969	Symphony Repertory Opera Company, Shreveport, Louisiana
1971	NYCO
1971	Turnau Opera Players (Woodstock, New York)

⁸⁰⁰ This list is hardly exhaustive. In 1999, Anthony Tommasini reported: “There have been more than 800 performances [of *Susannah*] around the world.” See “Critic’s Notebook: Taking a Look Into the Soul of ‘Susannah.’” Floyd’s biographer reports that in 2002, the composer “estimated conservatively that *Susannah* had in its forty-seven years been performed between eight hundred and nine hundred times, in two hundred to three hundred productions.” See Thomas Holliday, *Falling Up*, 393. It is difficult, however, to track down all of these performances, or even all of those which occurred within the United States, as no definitive or complete compilation of performances exists. I compiled this list using Boosey and Hawkes’s archive of performances, the service Opera America, the magazine *Opera News*, Floyd’s archival collection at the South Caroliniana Library, Holliday’s biography, as well as my own knowledge of various productions.

Table 3.1 (Continued)

1971	Washington Civic Opera Association (Washington, DC)
1971	Orlando Opera (Florida)
1972	NYCO
1972	Houston Grand Opera (Texas)
1972	Colorado Springs Opera Association (Colorado)
1976	Houston Grand Opera
1976	Fort Worth Opera (Texas)
1977	Lyric Opera of Kansas City (Missouri)
1979	Cincinnati Opera
1980	Pittsburgh Opera (Pennsylvania)
1980	Lake George Opera Festival (Saratoga Springs, New York)
1980-81	Opera Omaha (Nebraska)
1981	San Diego Opera (California)
1982	NYCO
1986	Knoxville Opera (Tennessee)
1986-87	Orlando Opera
1988	Cincinnati Opera
1989	Tulsa Opera (Oklahoma)
1991	Lyric Opera of Kansas City
1992	Bronx Opera Company (New York)
1993	Lyric Opera of Chicago (Illinois)
1993	Berkshire Opera Company (Lenox, Massachusetts)
1995	Dayton Opera (Ohio)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

1996	Opera Theatre of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania)
1996	Houston Grand Opera
1997	Central City Opera (Colorado)
1998	Opera Theatre of Pittsburgh
1998	Springfield Regional Opera (Missouri)
1998	Augusta Opera (Georgia)
1998	Opera Festival of New Jersey
1999	Kentucky Opera
1999	City Opera of San Francisco
1999	Metropolitan Opera
1999	Union Avenue Opera (Missouri)
1999	Ash Lawn/Highland Festival (Virginia)
1999	Washington Opera (Washington, DC)
1999	Jefferson Performing Arts Society (Louisiana)
2000	Kentucky Opera
2000	Nashville Opera (Tennessee)
2000	Connecticut Opera
2000	Indianapolis Opera (Indiana)
2000	California Opera Association
2000	Long Leaf Opera (North Carolina)
2000	Fort Worth Opera
2001	Toledo Opera (Ohio)
2001	Opera Carolina
2001	Utah Festival Opera
2002	Lyric Opera of Chicago
2002	Shreveport Opera (Louisiana)
2002	Palm Beach Opera (Florida)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

2002	Eugene Opera (Oregon)
2002	Opera Memphis (Tennessee)
2002	Festival Opera Association (Walnut Creek, California)
2002	Knoxville Opera
2002	Municipal Opera Company of Baltimore (Maryland)
2003	Opera Columbus (Ohio)
2003	Longwood Opera (Needham, Massachusetts)
2003	Opera Company Philadelphia (Pennsylvania)
2003	Opera Saratoga (New York)
2004	Opera Southwest (Albuquerque, New Mexico)
2004	Chautauqua Opera (New York)
2004	Heartwood Regional Theatre Company (Damariscotta, Maine)
2005	Opera Columbus
2005	Hawaii Opera Theatre
2005	Fargo-Morehead Opera (North Dakota)
2005	Asheville Lyric Opera (North Carolina)
2006	Dicapo Opera Theatre (New York, New York)
2006	Virginia Opera
2006	Boheme Opera (Trenton, New Jersey)
2007	Arizona Opera
2008	Opera Pacific (Costa Mesa, California)
2008	Central City Opera
2009	Mobile Opera (Alabama)
2010	Des Moines Metro Opera (Iowa)

Table 3.1 (Continued)

2010	Sarasota Opera (Florida)
2011	Philadelphia Opera Collective (Pennsylvania)
2011	San Francisco Parlor Opera (California)
2011	Loyola Opera Theater (North Baltimore, Maryland)
2012	Florentine Opera (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)
2012	Undercroft Opera (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)
2013	Opera Idaho
2014	St. Petersburg Opera (Florida)
2014	Church of the Redeemer, Morristown, New Jersey
2014	San Francisco Opera
2015	Rimrock Opera (Billings, Montana)
2015	Toledo Opera
2016	Opera Pasadena
2017	Opera Roanoke
2017	Opera in the Ozarks

Table 3.2

College, Conservatory, and Workshop Productions of *Susannah*, 1955-2016⁸⁰¹

Year	College, Conservatory, or Workshop
1955	Florida State University (premiere)
1957	University of Southern California Opera Workshop
1961	University of Tulsa (Oklahoma)
1964	University of Alabama
1972	Southern Methodist University (Dallas, Texas)
1976	Academy of Vocal Arts (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)
1977	Indiana University
1980	Columbia Lyrica Opera/University of South Carolina
1985	University of Kansas
1987	Hartt School of Music (West Hartford, Connecticut)
1989	Florida State University
1991	New England Conservatory of Music (Boston, Massachusetts)
1992	California State University, Northridge
1992	University of South Carolina
1994	University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (Ohio)
1997	University of Louisville (Kentucky)
1998	Aspen Opera Theatre (Colorado)
1999	Northern Illinois University
1999	University of Michigan

⁸⁰¹ College, conservatory, and workshop productions of *Susannah* are even harder to track than professional productions. This list is also not exhaustive. Here again, I compiled it using Boosey and Hawkes's archive of performances, the service Opera America, the magazine *Opera News*, Floyd's archival collection at the South Caroliniana Library, Holliday's biography, as well as my own knowledge of various productions.

Table 3.2 (Continued)

2000	University of California, Los Angeles
2000	Indiana University
2001	Juilliard School of Music
2002	Western Michigan University
2002	DuPage College Opera (Glen Ellyn, Illinois)
2002	Southern Utah University
2003	Oklahoma University
2003	Baldwin Wallace College (Berea, Ohio)
2003	Central Methodist University (Fayette, Missouri)
2003	Ventura College (California)
2003	Colorado State University
2003	University of Tennessee/Knoxville Opera
2004	Southern Methodist University
2004	State University of New York, Oneonta
2004	Southern Utah State University
2004	Louisiana State University
2004	Eastman School of Music (Rochester, New York)
2004	University of North Carolina, Greensboro
2004	University of Nevada
2005	Florida State University (50 th anniversary production)
2006	Point Loma University (San Diego, California)
2006	Washington University (St. Louis, Missouri)
2008	University of Texas
2008	Lee University (Cleveland, Tennessee)
2009	University of Texas, El Paso
2010	Michigan State University
2010	Boston University
2010	University of Iowa
2011	Loyola University (New Orleans)

Table 3.2 (Continued)

2012	Webster University (Webster Groves, Missouri)
2012	Capital University (Columbus, Ohio)
2012	University of Utah
2012	Berks Opera Workshop (Reading, Pennsylvania)
2013	University of Denver (Colorado)
2015	Southern Methodist University
2015	University of Minnesota
2016	Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan)
2016	Northwestern University
2016	University of Northern Iowa
2016	Oklahoma State University

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