



Vanessa



Music by Samuel Barber

Libretto by Gian Carlo Menotti

First Performance January 15, 1958, Metropolitan Opera, New York City

Study Guide for Pacific Opera Victoria's Production

April – May, 2011

YOUNG ARTIST PROGRAM PATRON: DR. ERIKA KURTH, BA, MA, D.Litt.

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Welcome to Pacific Opera Victoria!

This Study Guide and the attached Activity Guide have been created primarily to assist teachers in preparing students for their visit to the opera. It is our hope that teachers will be able to add this to the existing curriculum in order to expand students' understanding of opera, literature, history, and the fine arts.

Materials in the Study Guide may be copied and distributed to students. Some students may wish to go over the information at home if there is not enough time to discuss in class. The opera experience can be made more meaningful and enjoyable when students have the opportunity to learn about the opera before they attend the performance.

Please visit <http://www.pov.bc.ca> to download this study guide or to find more information about the opera including musical selections from POV's Best of YouTube and artist biographies. POV Study Guides for other operas are also available for download.

Teachers: Your comments and suggestions would be greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire at the end of this study guide.

Please Note: The Dress Rehearsal is the last opportunity the singers will have on stage to work with the orchestra before Opening Night. Since vocal demands are so great on opera singers, some singers choose not to sing in full voice during the Dress Rehearsal in order to preserve their voice for opening night.

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Vanessa

Music by Samuel Barber

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First Performance January 15, 1958, Metropolitan Opera, New York City

Dress Rehearsal: April 26, 2011, 7:30 pm

Performances: April 28, May 3, 5, 7, 2011, 8 pm; April 30, 3 pm

The Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC

Sung in English, with English Surtitles

The performance is approximately 2 ½ hours, with one intermission.

Cast and Creative Team

Cast in order of vocal appearance

Erika, Vanessa's niece, a young girl of twenty

Nicholas, The Major-domo

Vanessa, a lady of great beauty in her late thirties

Anatol, a handsome young man in his early twenties

The Old Baroness, Vanessa's mother and Erika's grandmother

The Old Doctor

The Footman

Stephanie Marshall

Sam Marcaccini

Wendy Nielsen

Adam Luther

Rebecca Hass

Andrew Greenwood

Sean Sager

Servants, Guests, Peasants, their Children

Conductor

Director

Set and Costume Designer

Lighting Designer

Choreographer

Resident Stage Manager

Assistant Stage Managers

Apprentice Stage Manager

Principal Coach & Répétiteur

Chorus Master & Assistant to the Artistic Director

Assistant Accompanists

Timothy Vernon

Glynis Leyshon

Pam Johnson

Gerald King

Jacques Lemay

Sandy Halliday

Rebecca Craster, Nicole Olszewski

Jessica McLeod

Robert Holliston

Giuseppe Pietraroia

Kim Cousineau, Anna Cal,

Csinszka Redai

With the Victoria Symphony and the POV Chorus



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Synopsis for Pacific Opera Victoria's Production of *Vanessa*

The opera is set around 1905, in a luxurious home in a snowy, unnamed northern country. All the mirrors are covered. Three generations of women share the house: Vanessa, her niece Erika, and her mother, the Baroness, who has not spoken to Vanessa for many years.

Act 1, Scene 1

An important guest is expected – Vanessa's lover of 20 years ago. As Erika gives the major-domo instructions for welcoming the visitor, Vanessa frets over every detail, from the French menu to the flowers and the necessity of keeping the bell at the gate ringing in case the sleigh is lost in the storm.

When the visitor arrives, Vanessa insists on meeting him alone. She gives him no chance to speak, but pours out the emotions of 20 years of waiting to the man standing in the shadows. She finishes with an ultimatum: *If you do not love me, I shall ask you to leave my house this very night.* He handles the situation with considerable aplomb, responding *Yes, I believe I shall love you.* Horrified to find a young stranger before her, Vanessa staggers out, leaving Erika to deal with the visitor.

The visitor explains that he is Anatol, the son of Vanessa's old lover, who has died. He has come to see the woman whom his mother hated and his father longed for. Erika and Anatol dine together.

Act 1, Scene 2

A month later Erika confesses to her grandmother that she is passionately in love with Anatol, who seduced her the night of his arrival. Although he has offered to marry her, she senses he is incapable of returning her love. She has noticed that Vanessa too is in love with him.

Vanessa and Anatol come in from skating as the doctor arrives. After Vanessa announces that she will unveil the mirrors and portraits and hold a grand ball, she and the doctor try to teach Anatol to dance. When the men go out into the garden, Vanessa confides to Erika that Anatol has hinted at marriage. The Baroness urges Erika to speak out if she wants Anatol.

When Erika confronts Anatol about his conversation with Vanessa, he mockingly assures her he's still willing to marry her for the pleasure of it, and take her off to Paris and Rome, but that eternal love is out

of the question. Everyone departs for church, leaving Erika alone. Watched over by a wild woodland spirit, she examines herself in a mirror. Finally she declares that her answer is no – Vanessa can have Anatol.

Act 1, Scene 3

At Vanessa's New Year's Eve party, the doctor, a little tipsy, remarks how an attractive woman can make him lose his mind. He has been chosen to announce the engagement of Vanessa and Anatol. Vanessa sends him upstairs to fetch Erika and the Baroness. When she wonders to Anatol why Erika refuses to join the festivities, he tells her not to search into the past lest she find only lies.

As the doctor makes the happy announcement, Erika, weak and pale, appears at the back of the crowded room, then clutches her stomach and faints. While the guests toast the couple, the major-domo tries to help Erika, but she asks to be left alone and slips out into the cold. The baroness sees her running toward the lake and raises the alarm.

Intermission

Act 2, Scene 1

The next morning Anatol and the searchers find Erika on the path to the lake and bring her back, unconscious. Mystified, Vanessa asks Anatol why Erika acted so desperately. She demands the truth, asking whether Erika loves him. He swears she does not, and Vanessa begs him to take her away, to help her take flight from the house; he agrees, saying, *Only the mad, only the blind can fly.*

Erika tells her grandmother that she was pregnant and that her child will not be born. The baroness gets up and, without another word to Erika, leaves the room.

Act 2, Scene 2

Two weeks later, Anatol and Vanessa have married and are preparing to leave for Paris. The doctor reminisces about Vanessa's childhood. Vanessa tells Erika she has willed her the house, but urges her not

to tell Anatol. When Vanessa asks Erika for the truth of what happened, Erika says only that she loved someone who didn't love her – and swears it was not Anatol.

As Anatol reminds Erika that he once thought she would be the one with whom he would leave, she urges him to make Vanessa happy. The women, Anatol, and the doctor sing a farewell about the elusiveness of love.

*To leave, to break, to find, to keep, to stay, to wait;
to hope, to dream, to weep and remember.
To love is all of this and none of it is love.
The light is not the sun nor the tide the moon.*

When Vanessa and Anatol have left, Erika calls out his name in anguish. She then orders the mirrors in the house to be covered again and the gate locked. As she sits by her silent grandmother, guarded by the woodland spirit, she says, *Now it is my turn to wait.*

Maureen Woodall

Background of *Vanessa*

Just before the premiere of *Vanessa*, Barber pointed out that it wasn't actually his first opera:

At nine I wrote my first opera, still in manuscript. I called it The Rose Tree. The libretto was by our cook, Annie Sullivan Brosius Noble. She had been imported from Ireland by my grandmother ... Once when my mother asked her what we were having for dessert she answered, "Madam, a little something of my own. It is called a Bird's-Eye View of Death." (For the record, it was left-over cake with varying sauces.) Quick to pounce on literary talent - and miraculously close to home, at that - I asked her to write the text for me. She complied according to her moods, evasive or enthusiastic, like all librettists.

The hero was a tenor on vacation from the Metropolitan Opera Company who fell in love with a soprano.

This opera did not progress beyond Act I, not because the cook left, for they didn't leave in those days. Annie died.

The jibe at librettists came from experience. Barber had considered a number of librettists for *Vanessa*, including Thornton Wilder and Dylan Thomas, but eventually his companion and fellow composer, Gian

Carlo Menotti, who had already written both words and music for half a dozen operas, volunteered.

It was not the easiest collaboration, as Barber recalled:

I think he wondered whether I really would do it, and I know I wondered whether I really could. I remembered what Poulenc said when he was starting his first opera: "Just throw yourself in!" It was decided that Menotti would write the first scene and we would see how that turned out. ... By late summer the scene was finished ... Now utterly engrossed, I asked him for more words in a hurry, to go full steam ahead.

*Here was the beginning of a new trial of patience! He explained that I would have to wait until January, as he must leave for New York to produce *The Saint of Bleeker Street*. This was at the point in my opera when, after Vanessa's aria, Anatol first appears, silhouetted in semi-darkness in the doorway. She turns to him and screams. He remains standing.*

*And standing there in that drafty doorway in a northern country in deep winter, Anatol remained for four months until January. Once again my errant librettist asked for a reprieve, for now the Saint was to be done at La Scala. Not to mention the trials of Anatol (for no tenor must ever stand in a draft, even for a second), this composer was not fit to live with that winter. He fled to Greece and reorchestrated his *Medea*. And Anatol stood.*

When, the next spring, Menotti was at last free, I refused to write a note until the complete libretto was finished - a technique Menotti himself does not use. Doubly endowed, he has heretofore been in the privileged position of being both librettist and composer and could always jump to the defense of the underdog, as it were, whichever it was. My tactic succeeded brilliantly: it made him so nervous that he sat on a rock by the Mediterranean every morning until, by summer's end, what I think is perhaps the finest and most chiseled of his libretti was finished. ...

All Barber now had to do, besides write the music, was choose a name for his heroine – *It came from a book I found in the Holliday Bookshop: How to Name Your Child!*

Although the story is original, some of *Vanessa's* intense romantic atmosphere was inspired by *Seven Gothic Tales* by Isak Dinesen (pseudonym of the Danish writer Karen Blixen) – a set of singular stories

set among the aristocracy. These startling psychological portraits are marked by their macabre sophistication, a whiff of eroticism and madness, formidable female characters, and brilliant, idiosyncratic writing.

In describing the story and the characters of *Vanessa*, Menotti said,

This is the story of two women, Vanessa and Erika, caught in the central dilemma which faces every human being: whether to fight for one's ideals to the point of shutting oneself off from reality, or compromise with what life has to offer, even lying to oneself for the mere sake of living. Like a sullen Greek chorus, a third woman (the old Grandmother) condemns by her very silence the refusal first of Vanessa, then of Erika, to accept the bitter truth that life offers no solution except its own inherent struggle. When Vanessa, in her final eagerness to embrace life, realizes this truth, it is perhaps too late.

The role of Vanessa was intended to be a star turn for the great soprano Maria Callas. Barber invited the diva to his home to hear him sing and play the music (she brought along an entourage of husband, two record company representatives, secretary, and dog).

There are several theories as why Callas turned down the role. She had never sung opera in English. Another story is that she lost her appetite for the role as soon as Barber began the opening scene in which Vanessa gives orders about the dinner menu; Callas is said to have complained, *How can I possibly sing a role that begins with the words 'too many sauces'?*

It is equally likely that she feared being upstaged by the mezzo. As Barber put it, with enormous delicacy, *Being very astute, she noticed certain things about the libretto which gave a little too much importance to the mezzo-soprano, the role of Erika, which is a very strong role.*

Callas is also said to have insisted that she couldn't possibly be expected to fall in love with a man who had already slept with the mezzo soprano.

Callas had a point: although Vanessa walks off with both the man and the title credit, the role of Erika is in every way as compelling, and this became clear at the opening. The young mezzo Rosalind Elias was cast as Erika and indeed nearly stole the show. The role of Vanessa was ultimately performed by the American soprano Eleanor Steber who filled in after Sena Jurinac cancelled on short notice. Steber was a sensation Tenor Nicolai Gedda, in his debut season at the Met, played Anatol.

The opera premiered on January 15, 1958 to sold out houses and rapturous reviews. It was called *the best US opera yet staged at the Metropolitan* (of 19 American operas previously produced at the Met) and *a major contribution to the international repertory*. The New Yorker gushed that *Vanessa was the finest and most truly 'operatic' opera ever written by an American ... one of the most impressive things ... to appear anywhere since Richard Strauss's more vigorous days,*

The conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos said of it, *The whole texture of Vanessa is highly theatrical and dramatic, full of orchestral surprises and climaxes, but always at the service of the stage, as any real opera should be ... At last, an American grand opera!*



Ira Resnik (the Baroness), Eleanor Steber (Vanessa) and Rosalind Elias (Erika) in the 1958 premiere production of *Vanessa*. 1958.
<http://www.operanews.com/operanews/templates/content.aspx?id=15383>

Barber's *Vanessa* won the 1958 Pulitzer Prize and, in August of the same year, the European premiere was produced in Salzburg - the first American opera at the festival, and the first in Salzburg's history to be sung in English.

But the more avant-garde European critics criticized the opera as *chromaticized Puccini, plus a few ounces of Strauss, Wagner and Tchaikovsky with a shot of Debussy*.

As critic Anthony Tommasini explains,

Contemporary-music hard-liners ... dismissed Barber as a hopeless conservative, shameless neo-Romantic and lushly tonal panderer, unlike the tough-guy modernists who claimed the intellectual high ground during that polemical period. Enough of that attitude took hold in America to consign "Vanessa" to the category of hokey midcentury operas not worth bothering about.

Samuel Barber was, in the words of Paul Wittke, an editor with Schirmer, *a maverick romantic lyricist in a turbulent age* – and until enough time passed for a more balanced assessment, the opera was rarely remounted.

Now, however, the opera is revived more frequently, and, as New York Times critic Peter Davis says, *Like so many of those domestic dramas custom made for Hollywood's old screen divas, "Vanessa" can also be devilishly effective ... the vocal writing has a lyrical consistency that one seldom hears in new operas these days; the musical and dramatic pacing is amazingly assured; and the final 20 minutes — that glorious quintet, similar in tone and wholly comparable to the famous trio in Strauss's "Rosenkavalier" — are as inspired as anything in American opera.*

Maureen Woodall



1958: The ensemble for the European premiere of Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* at the Salzburg Festival. Standing (from left): Giorgio Tozzi (the doctor), Ira Malaniuk (the Baroness), Gian Carlo Menotti (the librettist), unknown, Alois Pernerstorfer (the Major-domo), Nicolai Gedda (Anatol) and Rudolf Bing (General Manager of the Metropolitan Opera).

Seated (from left): Dimitri Mitropoulos (the conductor), Eleanor Steber (*Vanessa*), Rosalind Elias (*Erika*) and Samuel Barber (the composer).

From

<http://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/history/1958>

Samuel Barber: An Iconic Voice in American Music

Samuel Barber always knew he wanted to be a composer, though he suspected very early that it was not the most respectable of professions. At the age of nine, he wrote in great distress to his mother:

Dear Mother: I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Now don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now without any nonsense. To

begin with I was not meant to be an athlete [sic]. I was meant to be a composer, and will be I'm sure. I'll ask you one more thing. —Don't ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football. —Please— Sometimes I've been worrying about this so much that it makes me mad (not very).

Young Samuel had reasonable grounds for his concern: His aunt Louise had married a composer,

Sidney Homer, exciting consternation among the family lest he be unable to support a wife. But by the time Samuel was considering his own future, Louise had been singing at the Metropolitan Opera for two decades, and Uncle Sidney had become a loving mentor for young Samuel.

At the age of 14 Barber entered the Curtis Institute, where he studied voice, piano, and composition and met Gian Carlo Menotti, who would be his life partner and artistic collaborator, supplying libretti for Barber's operas *Vanessa* and *A Hand of Bridge*.

Barber quickly became a very successful composer. While still in his twenties he wrote the iconic piece for which he is best known, the *Adagio for Strings*. It was originally the second movement of his *String Quartet, op. 11*, but Barber arranged it for orchestra and sent it to the great Arturo Toscanini, who broadcast the premiere to a radio audience of millions ... a real coup for a young composer.

The piece was an immediate hit and has become an unofficial American anthem of mourning – played at the announcement of Franklin D. Roosevelt's death, and at the funerals of Albert Einstein, Princess Grace, and Leonard Bernstein. It has also firmly embedded itself in popular American culture. It's heard in the movies *Platoon*, *The Elephant Man*, and *Lorenzo's Oil*, on Michael Moore's documentary *Sicko*, and in video game soundtracks. It's been arranged, covered, synthesized, sampled, and remixed; it pops up in genres such as disco, rap and trance. It's been featured on episodes of *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park* – surely no further proof is needed that it is part of our cultural fabric!

None of this takes away from the fact that the *Adagio* is a riveting piece, stunning in its utter simplicity; but

Samuel Barber's Songs and Poets

Not every great opera composer has found himself equally at home in the more intimate world of song. And vice versa: the operas of Schubert and Schumann have never found a place in the permanent repertoire, while the songs of Verdi, Puccini, and the *bel canto* composers are only rarely heard on the recital platform.

Responsiveness to the nuances of poetic text is not always compatible with an instinct for the telling theatrical gesture (a small number of Mozart's *Lieder*

it tends to overshadow Barber's many other masterpieces, including sonatas and concerti for cello, for piano, and for violin, the ballet *Medea*, his *Essays for Orchestra*, choral and orchestral works, and works for solo piano, as well as three operas and numerous vocal works.

Many of Barber's compositions were commissioned or premiered by such famous artists as Vladimir Horowitz, Eleanor Steber, Jennie Tourel, Leontyne Price, Francis Poulenc, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Martha Graham, Dmitri Mitropoulos, Serge Koussevitzky and of course, Arturo Toscanini.

A contemporary of Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, Barber was, like them, at the heart of mid-century American artistic life. Menotti recalled the string of luminaries who visited Capricorn, the home he shared with Barber in New York: *I remember wonderful evenings with Vladimir Horowitz, Martha Graham, Marcel Duchamp, Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Jerome Robbins, Tallulah Bankhead. I can't begin to recall all the famous people who were part of those years.*

Along with George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber ranks as one of the most important American composers of the 20th century. In a century of atonality, serialism and other waves of musical fashion, Barber went his own neo-Romantic way, incorporating modern techniques if they suited the music, but staying true to himself with his lyrical, dramatic, wonderfully accessible music. His editor Paul Wittke called Barber *a maverick romantic lyricist in a turbulent age* and said of him that *he demanded very little – only intelligence and perfection.*

Maureen Woodall

are masterpieces, but he turned to this genre infrequently).

From the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth, however, we find many composers contributing significantly to both genres: Debussy, Ravel, Poulenc; Berg, Korngold, Bartók, Falla; above all Richard Strauss and Benjamin Britten, who are not only masterful but prolific in both. To this list of names we must add that of Samuel Barber, whose songs have long been universally well-loved and

whose operas are just now beginning to assume the position they have always merited.

For his opera libretti, Barber relied on the collaboration of his personal and professional partner, Gian-Carlo Menotti (himself an opera composer of significant success and distinction). But in choosing texts for his songs, the composer was remarkably far-reaching, perceptive, and (an old-fashioned but nonetheless accurate word) tasteful.

The first requirement for a composer of song in any language may be a love of poetry, but surely the second is an instinctive drive to convey a deeply personal response to – or interpretation of – the poem through the medium of music. (The tradition of art song – *Lied*, *mélodie* – has always meant the musical setting of a pre-existing text; throughout the middle ages and Renaissance it was common for composers to write their own lyrics, but this is almost nonexistent in nineteenth and twentieth-century song.) The response may be to the poem's meaning or story (if it has one) or to the images it evokes or even the sonority of its vowels and consonants. The song that results is not a poem any longer, but neither is it really a piece of music: this fusion of text and music is its own art form (although it must be said that the contribution of the composer is the paramount one: examples abound of successful settings of mediocre poems, but no poem, however great, makes the transition to song without inspired music).

Samuel Barber had two great advantages from the beginning: first, he was a singer; his aunt, Louise Homer, was a leading operatic contralto (who even premiered her nephew's earliest song) and as a student at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, Barber took voice lessons alongside his studies in piano and composition. (Later in life, during the annual Christmas gathering he hosted at his home outside New York City, Barber would entertain his guests by accompanying himself as he sang Irish ballads and other sentimental songs.) Second, he was never, throughout his life, without a volume or two of poetry at his bedside. In a 1978 radio interview the composer discussed the role poetry played in his work:

The text means a great deal to me. I read tons and tons of poetry anyway, so I go through tons and tons of poems that could possibly be songs. It's very hard to find them ... They are either too wordy or they are

too introverted ... It's hard for me to enjoy poetry per se, as I always have in the back of my mind the feeling that I may come across a usable song text. I tend to mark things when I read a promising poem for the first time, and then go back and try to appreciate it simply as poetry. However, I do enjoy reading contemporary poetry, not only in English, but in German and French, and I've made a real study of Dante and Goethe in their original language

Although Barber was at home in many languages, the only songs for which he used poems in a foreign language are the *Mémoires passagères* (Rainer Maria Rilke). "Setting French to music is ticklish. The French are very, very particular about it." Barber's success in this language can be attested to by the fact that the cycle was given its first performance by Pierre Bernac and Francis Poulenc – and in Paris.

Barber had a life-long passion for Celtic poetry: James Stephens, William Butler Yeats, and perhaps most importantly, James Joyce. These poets feature in many of the composer's earliest songs, strikingly in the *Three Songs*, Op. 10 (1935-36) which are all settings of Joyce poems. Later, in 1947, this poet is encountered again in "Nuvoletta," adapted from the "Mookse and Gripses" section of *Finnegans Wake*. It is one of Barber's more complex songs – appropriately for this text – and he even uncharacteristically quotes Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. One of Barber's earliest masterpieces – one he remained proud of throughout his life – is a setting for baritone and string quartet of Matthew Arnold's melancholic poem *Dover Beach*. Discussing this text when he was 70, Barber said, "It's extremely pessimistic – the emotions seem contemporary. *Dover Beach* is one of the few Victorian poems which continues to hold its stature; it is a great poem, in fact." And a great song: when Barber played it for Ralph Vaughan Williams shortly after completing the final version, the older composer was enthusiastic: "I tried several times to set *Dover Beach*, but you really got it."

Barber's taste in poetry could be eclectic: the *Hermit Songs* of 1952-53 (premiered by Leontyne Price with the composer at the piano) are settings of poems by anonymous Irish monks and scholars of the 8th to 13th centuries, translated by, among others, W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman. Robin Flower wrote about them in *The Irish Tradition*:

They are small poems, thoughts or observations, some very short, and speak in straightforward, witty,

and often surprisingly modern terms of the simple life they led – close to nature, their animals and to God. Some are literal translations and others, were translated (where existing translations seemed inadequate.) It was not only that these scribes and anchorites lived by the destiny of their dedication in an environment of wood and sea; it was because they brought into that environment an eye washed miraculously clear by a continual spiritual exercise that they had that strange vision of natural things in an almost unnatural purity.

During Barber's middle and late years he set many texts by English and American poets, none more poignantly than James Agee. *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is a musical setting of an excerpt from Agee's story *Knoxville*, set in the American south during the summer before the death of the poet's father. Barber described this work (for soprano – or tenor – and orchestra) as a Rhapsody (a relatively free form, characterized by contrasting sections, which suits the narrative exactly). The opening lines establish an atmosphere which is captured beautifully by Barber's music:

We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child. It was a little bit mixed sort of block, fairly solidly lower middle class, with one or two juts apiece on either side of that. The houses corresponded: middlesized gracefully fretted wood houses built in the late nineties and early nineteen hundreds, with small front and side and more spacious back yards, and trees in the yards.

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 was premiered in 1948 by Eleanor Steber, with Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Although critical reception was mixed, this became – and remains – one of Barber's best-loved and most frequently performed scores. Of all his single songs, it is another setting of Agee, "Sure on this shining night," that is equally esteemed and frequently heard in recital.

One of Barber's most ardent champions, the great American pianist John Browning, wrote about the

composer's highly personal style, one which employed "20th-century techniques only as devices to enhance his art, not as the rigid methods he felt were restrictive." Browning describes Barber's language as "that of the poet – swift changes of mood and a pervading melancholy and loneliness conveyed on a sumptuous harmonic tapestry ... by the age of 30, [Barber] possessed a musical knowledge so comprehensive and a craft so well-honed that there were virtually no colors, textures, or forms beyond his ability." Certainly this mastery is apparent in Barber's last collection of songs, written in 1972 for Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, on poems by James Joyce, Christopher Middleton, and Czeslaw Milosz. There is an overlay of chromaticism and dissonance in these songs that reflect the poems with great immediacy. Asked in an interview if poetry had ever dictated a change, however slight, in his musical style, Barber responded, "I think that's happened a little, but when it did it would only last for one poem." This ability to respond so personally and deeply to a poem – part instinct, part mastery – is characteristic of Barber's songs throughout his life.

Throughout his life as well, Barber was somewhat conscious of a tendency on the part of the academic musical establishment to dismiss him as an anachronism; the perceived Romanticism of his scores was not considered valid for a composer of the twentieth century. Barber himself, late in life, put it very simply:

I think that what's been holding composers back a great deal is that they feel they music have a new style every year. That, in my case, would be hopeless ... I just go on, as they say, doing my own thing. I believe this takes a certain courage.

Critic John Simon, who considers Barber a genuinely great American composer (and who rates his music higher than Copland's) suggested that it did, indeed, take a certain courage, "especially if 'my thing' was some of the most unfashionably romantic, songful yet classically restrained music ever written."

Robert Holliston

Links for Further Reading

Vanessa

Libretto of the Opera

http://www.radio.rai.it/radio3/radio3_suite/archivio_2006/eventi/2006_11_11_vanessa/libretto_inglese.pdf

San Diego OperaTalk! with Nick Reveles: Vanessa

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqmGflohKOE>

Erika's Act 1 Aria, *Must the Winter Come so Soon?* Erika's touching, bittersweet aria is one of the highlights of the opera *Vanessa*. Erika sings it near the very beginning of the opera, when hope has actually, briefly returned to the gloomy house where she and her aunt Vanessa live. But this melancholy aria foreshadows the tragedy to come.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa4N9Xe_Nx0&feature=player_embedded

Samuel Barber & Gian Carlo Menotti

Biography of Samuel Barber

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Barber

Essay on Barber by his editor Paul Wittke

http://www.schirmer.com/default.aspx?TabId=2419&State_2872=2&ComposerId_2872=72

Biography and Essay on Menotti by Paul Wittke

http://www.schirmer.com/default.aspx?TabId=2419&State_2872=2&ComposerId_2872=1039

Listen to Barber's Music

The world premiere broadcast of Barber's Adagio for strings, New York, May 11, 1938. Arturo Toscanini conducted the NBC Symphony Orchestra

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrTIJ3S9DLQ>

Louise Homer, Barber's aunt, sings Stephen Foster's Hard Times Come Again No More in this 1919 recording with the Criterion Quartet and conductor Josef Pasternack.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JO6TRQji1H0>

Eleanor Steber sings Knoxville: Summer of 1915, which she commissioned. She was also the first Vanessa.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0dssUKWHAw>

Dover Beach sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, with the Juilliard Quartet

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BmO7qX0-qu4>

Dover Beach sung by Samuel Barber himself in 1935

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ubcVs8WRsg>

Sure on this shining night Op. 13, no. 3 arranged for choir by the composer. The Joyful company of Singers conducted by Peter Broadbent with Anthony Saunders at the piano

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEKBpKTdxj8>