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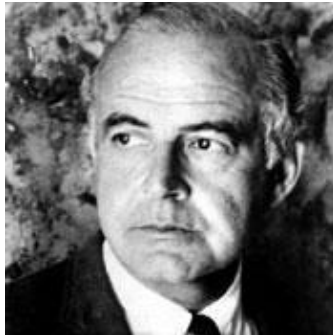
INTRODUCTION

"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" (Agee 3). These first words of James Agee's prose poem "Knoxville: Summer of 1915," introduce the reader to a world of his youth – rural Tennessee in the early part of the century. Agee's highly descriptive and lyrical language in phrases such as "these sweet pale streamings in the light out their pallors," (Agee 5) invites the reader to use all his senses and become enveloped in the inherent music of the language. Is it any wonder that upon reading Agee's words, composer Samuel Barber should be drawn into this narrative that enlivens the senses and touches the heart with its complexity of human emotions told through the recollections of childhood from a time of youth and innocence.

The search for their native voice – their "American" voice – was something that interested both James Agee and Samuel Barber. For Agee, it was finding the sights, sounds, and images of America that had been described in the works of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and his contemporaries, Southern writers William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Carson McCullers. For Barber, it was a different process. Samuel Barber had to discover his "American voice" by exploring borrowed traditions – folksongs, and homegrown popular musical styles of Jazz and the Blues. The idea of an "American voice" in music was already present and established in works of composers such as Charles Ives and Aaron Copland. For Barber, his native voice emerged when he chose James Agee's text to set to music.

SAMUEL BARBER

In her biography, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and his Music*, author Barbara Heyman writes that Barber is considered one of the most important American composers of the 20th century (Heyman *The Composer* 3). Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1910 to physician Samuel LeRoy Barber and pianist Marguerite McLeod, Barber was a member of an educated, social, and distinguished American family (Heyman *The Composer* 7-8).



Composer Samuel Barber

Barber was drawn to music and experienced its impact early in his life. His aunt Louise Homer was a leading contralto with the Metropolitan Opera, and his uncle Sidney Homer was a respected composer of American art song. Sidney and Louise were large influences on his musical study, as well: "...It was entirely due to Sidney Homer's encouragement that the Barbers allowed their son to be excused from school at noon to travel to Philadelphia to study at the Curtis Institute of Music in its charter year, 1924" (Heyman *The Composer* 17).

Heyman writes that Barber entered the Curtis Institute at the age of 14 where he studied voice, piano, and composition, and his gift as a young composer quickly emerged. His studies included a year abroad from 1935-36 where he pursued compositional studies. Barber was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music for two works: his opera *Vanessa* (1958) and his *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1963). Samuel Barber's works continue to be programmed frequently by orchestras and solo artists throughout the world (Heyman *The Composer* 34-35).

VOCAL WORKS

Although Samuel Barber composed music for orchestra, chamber ensemble, and solo piano, he is most celebrated for his vocal compositions. Heyman lists thirty-eight published and sixty-eight unpublished songs, as well as 3 operas and twelve choral pieces among his works. During his compositional life, Barber produced some 150 works organized in forty-seven complete opuses (Heyman *The Composer* 515-521).

Barber used a diverse range of poets and authors' writings when choosing the text for his songs, including texts he had written himself (Heyman *Catalogue* 507). According to author and professor Majorie Sandor, if Barber had not been called to a life as a composer, he would probably have chosen a career as an author (35). Barber favored the works of American and British authors, including poetry and prose of twenty-one American and twenty-six British authors. He also utilized texts from writers in other countries but these consist of only a handful of authors. Barber chose works of many eminent American poets including Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, and Theodore Roethke. Notable British authors include William Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Heyman *Catalogue* 507-511). Barber also utilized twelve translators, each of whom was fluent in both English and the language from which he was translating (Heyman *Catalogue* 510-511).

Although many of Barber's chosen authors are familiar and widely recognized, he also chose works of several less-celebrated writers. Barber followed in the compositional footsteps of 19th century German *Lied* composer Johannes Brahms, who chose poetry that moved him, despite its origin, and also of Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann, who were more discerning in their choices of texts, drawing on the most revered national poets of the day: Goethe, Schiller, Heine, and Eichendorff (Clive 413). The broad interest that Barber exhibited in poetry suggests that he chose substance over popularity and that he had an expansive awareness, appreciation, and interest of diverse subjects, as well as writing styles.

Barber was not constrained by a narrow selection of poetry and writing styles. This is evident in the works for voice that he composed throughout his creative life. The body of his work written for the voice reflects a broad range of emotion, subject, and compositional style that adapt to text and dramatic situation. Classified as both a Neo-Classicist and Neo-Romantic in his compositional style, Barber worked within the framework of traditional musical forms and harmony while continuing to push the boundaries of mid-20th century music to develop a recognizable "American voice" in his work.

JAMES AGEE

James Agee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1909 to Hugh James Agee and Laura Whitman Tyler (Kramer 18-19). Agee's father was killed in an auto accident when Agee was only 6 years old. This dramatic life event deeply impacted young Agee's life and influenced the type of writing that he would pursue throughout his lifetime. According to author Victor Kramer, "Agee's father has been described as having a rugged sweetness, a tenderness, a fine chiseled handsomeness, a rollicking good humor, that made the heartbreak [of his unexpected death] irreparable" (18). Agee enjoyed modest fame during his lifetime but his notoriety increased after he passed away, and his legacy has been enduring.



Author and Poet James Agee

Among his most noteworthy works are *Permit Me Voyage*, and his novel, *A Death in the Family*. The poem *Permit Me Voyage* was later incorporated as a forward to this semi-autobiographical novel based on the events surrounding his father's death. James Agee was also known as a writer of movie scripts, film criticisms, and magazine articles.

BARBER AND AGEE

Samuel Barber and James Agee appear to have had many similarities in their young lives, including their childhoods during the summer of 1915. As Heyman notes, Barber and Agee were both five years old in 1915. This summer was especially poignant for Agee, as it would be his last with his father. Heyman writes that as Barber read *Permit Me Voyage*, he was touched by the familiarity of childhood recollections that Agee described in this text:

The intensity of Barber's identification with Agee's reverie coincided with the impending death of his father, Roy Barber, who died on 11 August 1947, and his Aunt Louise Homer, who died on 6 May that same year. Letter, SB [Samuel

Barber] to Sidney Homer, 11 February 1947, documents that the work was begun sometime in February 1947:

'We have been through some difficult times in West Chester...I enclose the text of new work, just finished, for lyric soprano and orchestra. The text moved me very much. It is by...James Agee...I met him last week and admired him. This was actual prose, but I put it into lines to make the rhythmic patter clear. It reminded me so much of summer evenings in West Chester, now very far away, and all of you are in it! Eleanor Steber will probably do it with Koussevitzky, if she likes it' (Heyman *Catalogue* 282).

CONCEPT AND CREATION

Barber wrote *Knoxville* in the midst of great personal struggle. Both his aunt Louise Homer and his father were in failing health. His aunt died in May, and his father in August of 1947, just as Barber was completing the work. Barber's inscribed dedication, "In memory of my Father," speaks to the closeness of father and son. The kinship Barber and Agee shared through the profound impact of the death of their respective fathers lies at the emotional core of this work. The concept of "Knoxville: Summer of 1915" is Agee's dreamlike account of an evening in the American South, told from a child's point of view, but conveyed in the voice of an adult. The childhood memories weave a narrative that seems to emanate from the perspective of someone wise beyond his years. The ambiguous "voice" of the narrator heightens the trancelike quality of the work. A symbiotic relationship between poem and music emerges from elements that were created independently. James Agee's prose poem "Knoxville: Summer of 1915" was written in 1935, while Samuel Barber's work for soprano and orchestra that bears the same name was published in 1948 (Heyman *Catalogue* 281-282).

PROGRAM MUSIC

Though each creative work (literature and music) was written separately, there appears to be, as described by Sandor in her 2007 article *Word Music*, a sort of "literary – musical border crossing..." throughout the work (36). This concept is more accurately described as *program music*, a genre that suggests images or conveys the notion of a certain experience. This differs from the concept of *absolute music* that is composed for its own sake and does not convey an image or story. Sandor elaborates on the impact *program music* has on the listener in her article *Word Music*: "...And I didn't know, until the first time I listened to that work, how exquisitely two different art forms might fuse into one" (35).

LITERARY ANALYSIS

"...Agee was envisioning a literary form of symphony..." (Sandor 35). Agee utilized many brilliant literary techniques to create a prose poem that surrounds the reader with pleasant nostalgia. The narrative draws the reader/listener into a world that is equally eloquent when read and spoken aloud. The use of doublings is present throughout but especially offered in lines

such as "...rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars" (Agee 6).

Other elements that add to the beauty of Agee's words include the use of repetition, alliteration, personification, and imagery that is so alive it evokes all of the senses. In many phrases, Agee employs more than one literary technique. In his article, "Nostalgia and Cultural Memory in Barber's 'Knoxville: Summer of 1915,'" author Benedict Taylor writes "The poem expresses the author's desire to find his own identity through the recall of what he once was – a search for identity in the past, through memory" (214).

MUSICAL COMPOSITION ANALYSIS

Heyman describes the compositional structure of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* as being written in a "declamatory style – a lyric recitative with a freely varied metrical beat" (Heyman *Catalogue* 287). Barber uses a series of alternating compound meters in this work, facilitating a use of vernacular text setting which allows the vocal line to be easily understood. The medium-range *tessitura* of the vocal line is a key element in creating an understandable text, as shown in example 1:



Example 1 Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, Op. 24, (23)

The vocal line encompasses a range from C4 to Bb 5, with a one-octave *tessitura* of F#4 to F#5. A4 and B4 are the two notes that are sung the most often throughout the vocal line, and this comfortable middle range of notes allows the singer to freely articulate each word without having to utilize any vowel modifications to produce a precise and appealing tone quality. Barber's liberal and unexpected use of extended harmonies associated with Jazz – in particular, a flatted 7th scale degree and 9th, 11th, and 13th chords – surprise the listener with brief musical moments of a popular music style to match Agee's combination of formal poetic speech and a casual, conversational delivery of text, as shown in example 2:

The image shows a musical score for Example 2, Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, Op. 24, (17). The score is in 3/4 time and features a vocal line with lyrics: "stars are wide and a - live, they seem -". The piano accompaniment includes parts for Flute, Harp, Oboe, and Strings. Dynamics are marked as *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *p* (piano).

Example 2 Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, Op. 24, (17)

PERFORMANCES AND RECORDINGS

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 was written for soprano Eleanor Steber, who was the first American singer to commission a work for voice (Heyman *Catalogue* 282). Steber sang the work's première performance on April 9, 1948, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Serge Koussevitsky conducting (Heyman *Catalogue* 282).



Soprano Eleanor Steber

Since its debut, the work has been performed numerous times by renowned sopranos including Leontyne Price, Dawn Upshaw, and Kathleen Battle. It is an important work in the soprano repertoire with orchestra. A more recent performance of the work has included Anthony Rolfe Johnson, a British opera tenor.

In his NPR radio article, *Samuel Barber's Summertime Idyll*, reporter Bill Morelock, says: "The most effective performances [of the work] are those in which the soprano resists hurrying, 'talks' casually, and enunciates simply and clearly. It's good to hear these words. When a relaxed voice delivers the calmer material, we get a good foundation for confronting the dramatic, soaring passages to come" (Morelock 2008).

Through Barber's vernacular writing, the work offers the performer an ideal platform from which to relate the narrative, and provides the audience with an opportunity to leap into the gentle world that Agee's words present. Performers of many cultural backgrounds have become interested in *Knoxville* because of their connection to its multi-layered meanings and universal story: "'That was exactly my childhood,' declared Steber, who grew up in Wheeling, West

Virginia..." "As a southerner, it expresses everything I know about my...hometown...You can smell the South in it,' said [Leontyne] Price" (Heyman *Catalogue* 287).

Steber set the vocal standard of this work, as it was commissioned for her and written with her voice in mind. Nonetheless, numerous performances by different singers offer listeners the opportunity to obtain various perspectives of the work, as well as the ability to evaluate performances and better understand diverse interpretations.

Steber was an operatic soprano with a charming yet ample sound. She also possessed immense versatility as a performer, which enabled her to sing a broad array of repertoire. Steber sang *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* from the viewpoint of an adult looking back on her childhood and remembering, very vividly, a summer that had made a significant impact on her life. Steber utilized her warm and full vocal timbre to interpret a character with mature sound. Other interpreters of the work, sopranos Dawn Upshaw and Kathleen Battle, have light lyric soprano voices with a sweet timbre. The interpretations of these singers resemble a child musing about recent memories rather than the adult looking back on her childhood. Although a wide variety of soprano voices can and have successfully interpreted this work, Samuel Barber's tonal ideal for *Knoxville* most closely resembles the sound of Steber, for whom the work was written.

ORCHESTRATION

Heyman discusses the orchestration of Barber's work: "...*Knoxville*...is a mature expression of Barber's artistry in setting text, bringing into focus his strongest creative powers as a musical poet and master of orchestral color" (*Catalogue* 287). Barber uses the individual colors and characteristics of each instrument group in the orchestra to create a texture that resembles other voices in concert with one another and the soprano soloist. Barber uses the violins to introduce the vocal line, in a "voice" that mirrors the singer in timbre and sentiment, foreshadowing the mood the singer will convey in text. Once the voice enters, the strings continue with the line that was used to introduce the voice, this time complementing the vocal line in a way that is duet-like. This style of writing is shown in example 3:

Example 3 Samuel Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, Op. 24, (17)

When *Knoxville* was originally composed, the orchestra was large, with extended and doubled woodwinds. Instead of a standard orchestration that employed two flutes (with the second flutist also playing piccolo), Barber's original orchestra used three flutes (which both double one another and have separate lines), as well as a piccolo part. This 1947 larger orchestration was used in the première performance but Barber wrote a revised orchestration in 1950. This revised orchestration was a reduction of the original, which included, for example, only one flute part, one trumpet (instead of two), and alternative parts for clarinet and trumpet (Heyman *Catalogue* 281). This chamber orchestra version of *Knoxville* was written to be better suited for collegiate-level performers, as Barber explained in a note written to Sidney Homer on January 9, 1949: "As so few singers sing with symphony orchestra these days, I am thinking of making an arrangement of 'Knoxville' for small orchestra (say 10 or 12 players) which could be used all over; they tell me there is great activity in the colleges for this sort of thing" (Heyman *Catalogue* 282). The chamber orchestration of this work offers a larger and more diverse group of singers, as well as orchestras, the opportunity to perform this complex work. Younger voices are not always equipped to sing a solo work with a full orchestra, and some colleges may not have a full or highly skilled orchestra available.

CULTURAL IMPACT

Knoxville: Summer of 1915 is described as Samuel Barber's only "American" composition. There are several techniques that Barber used in order to create a truly seminal

American work when composing *Knoxville*. In his article, "Nostalgia and Cultural Memory in Barber's Knoxville: Summer of 1915," Taylor explains that *Knoxville* is "...an indelible distillation of a peculiarly American childhood that many feel they have-or would have wished to have-experienced" (211). Taylor also indicates that Barber may have written *Knoxville* in order to reminisce himself, on a time when life was more simple and worries were nonexistent:

...*Knoxville* is...atypical of Barber in that by most accounts it is the most 'American' piece in an oeuvre otherwise rarely seen as strongly touched by a national flavor. Composed in the wake of the second world war...*Knoxville* might be seen as a conjuring up a gentler time and place-a state of lost innocence... (212).

The use of Jazz and Blues musical idioms that Barber uses throughout the piece plays an important role in its "American" sentiment. The Blues is a truly American genre of music, which emerged in the South at the end of the 19th century. Its earliest roots can be drawn from African American folk songs and spirituals, and uncomplicated narratives. The connection that Samuel Barber made to a popular style of music in America was unique not only to his other compositions but also to other music being written at this time by other classical composers.

The text that Barber chose for *Knoxville* also plays a pivotal role in the "American" character of this work. James Agee produced text that described a time in our country's history that seemed almost perfect, where "people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds' hung havens, hangars" (Agee 6). Agee's colorful, highly descriptive, and specific language bathes the listener in sounds of lyrical words that become part of the work's musical texture.

The scene that Agee describes in his prose poem is one to which nearly every individual can relate. It is this connection that offers the feeling of nostalgia to the listener, even if the conjured images or sentimental feelings come from distinct experiences and emotional responses. Each of us can draw on memories that we felt were a gentler, less complicated time in our lives. Those are the feelings that *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* draws on to create truly remarkable nostalgia.

Barber's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is a genuine American masterwork which was formed by an exceptionally eloquent literary piece and a brilliantly orchestrated musical composition. The nearly flawless collaboration between poet and composer not only brought forth an exceptional musical composition but an opportunity for performers past and present to depict a piece of American culture and a moment in history filled with sincere gentleness.

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