Building a Home:  
Four Portraits in Twentieth-Century American Music

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*   *   *

This thesis is dedicated to all the trees who gave their lives to become the countless sheets of printer paper I expended over the past year. You did not die in vain.
Prologue: “There’s No Place Like Home…”

‘Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home!
A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world, is ne’er met with elsewhere.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
There’s no place like home, oh, there’s no place like home!

– “Home! Sweet Home!,” lyrics by John Howard Payne

If Billboard had started charting early enough, they might have named Henry Bishop and John Howard Payne’s “Home! Sweet Home!” the biggest hit of the nineteenth century. The song premiered as the melodramatic summit of the 1823 American-English opera *Clari, Maid of Milan*, an Anglicized update of the French fable of Beauty and the Beast. Clari (the opera’s Beauty), abducted by the despicable Duke Vivaldi (the opera’s Beast), sings “Home! Sweet Home!” in a moment of desperation and longing. Ecstatic reviews singled out the song as the highlight of the opera. “The music is the most beautiful and tender we have ever heard,” the *New York Mirror* pronounced.

The blandishments continued:

There was something in it inexpressibly tender. It seemed as if the spirit of her home was hovering around her, and welcoming her with that sacred, beautiful truth—“There’s no place like home!”

Almost immediately, the song metastasized throughout American households at an unprecedented clip. Music publishers nationwide sprinted to transcribe the song and issue a version suitable for amateurs—due to a loophole in copyright laws, any American company could print the song, leading seventeen major publishers to print seventeen

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1 “The Drama: Clari, or the Maid of Milan,” *New York Mirror*, 22 November 1823, p. 132.
nearly identical versions for voice and keyboard (see ex. 1).² It was said that, in its first year, “Home! Sweet Home!” sold 100,000 copies, an unverifiable and likely exaggerated figure. Even so, the song sold more copies than any other song to date, in part because publishers capitalized on the craze by arranging the song in every imaginable way.³ By 1870, music stores carried “Home! Sweet Home!” in the form of fantasies, variations, waltzes, polkas, marches, four-hand piano arrangements, choral arrangements of various shapes and sizes, and at least one hymnlike version that reupholstered the tune for religious use.⁴

⁴ All these and more are catalogued in Hamm, Yesterdays, 167, and Crawford, America’s Musical Life, 179.
Example 1: One of many keyboard and voice arrangements of Henry Bishop and John Howard Payne’s 1823 hit “Home! Sweet Home!” (mm. 1-17)

In public performance, “Home! Sweet Home!” retained a tenacious hold. Even as exuberance for *Clari* subsided and the opera faded out of the national repertory, popularity-minded singers found excuses to interpolate its hit tune into other operas.\(^5\) It became the signature ballad for the most popular sopranos of the era: it was a regular encore for the world-travelling Anna Bishop; Jenny Lind, the bewitching “nightingale of Sweden”; and Adelina Patti, at her peak the most profitable performer in the world. American critics who fawned over these superstars regularly placed “Home! Sweet Home!” on par with the best of the European canon. Sometimes they even intimated that “Home! Sweet Home!” surpassed those masterpieces: when Lind came to Boston on her

lucrative 1850-51 tour of America, John Sullivan Dwight, the forefather of American music criticism, applauded her renditions of Handel, Mozart, and Mendelssohn but esteemed above all her “Home! Sweet Home!,” which he described as “youthful, hearty, vigorous.”6 Singing in opulent venues, entertaining governors, barons, queens, and Presidents of the United States, Bishop, Lind, and Patti brought an unintended literal meaning to the song’s opening line—“‘mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam.”

They must have seen a fantastically incongruous sight: world leaders bursting into sympathetic tears while listening to a song about humble, uncomplicated living.

As the century progressed, the song never dipped in popularity—yet its perception underwent an about-face. In the 1820s, the tune’s stratospheric success resembled widespread pop appeal. By the middle of the century, the song had modulated in the minds of listeners into a folky chestnut, a token of American propriety and moral rectitude. The phrase “home, sweet home” acquired its modern sense, becoming a slogan of domesticity that adorned needlework portraits, doormats, decorative signs, and mailboxes. The transformation began as early as 1844, with the premiere of William Henry Sedley’s lengthily-titled temperance play, The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved: A Moral Domestic Drama in Five Acts. In the final scene, the protagonist and titular drunkard Edward Middleton sits with his wife and daughter for the first time since miraculously surmounting his drinking problem. The scene starts sentimental—“everything denoting domestic peace and tranquil happiness” is the blunt mandate in the stage directions—and ends positively schmaltzy, with a “chorus of Villagers” singing

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“Home! Sweet Home!” with suggested orchestral accompaniments.\(^7\) In retrospect, a musical finale to a sobering drama seems tastelessly over-the-top. In its day, however, the play was an outright smash, its spectacular success bested solely by the tune it blatantly co-opted.

Although only several decades old, “Home! Sweet Home!” had become integral to American song and life. For songwriters, it became the paragon of the “home song,” a genre of American popular song marked by nostalgia and longing for domestic coziness. Songs of all different breeds admit the influence of “Home! Sweet Home!”: Stephen Foster’s minstrel tune “Old Folks at Home,” the Western song “Home on the Range,” even the Gershwins’ “The Man I Love.” The “roam/home” rhyme from “Home! Sweet Home!” shows up in every one, like a snippet of genetic code.\(^8\) During the American Civil War, camp bands on both sides infrequently performed freshly penned war songs such as the Union’s “National Hymn” and the Confederacy’s “God Bless Our Southern Land,” both set to the tune of “America” as if fighting for musical proprietorship. By the soldiers’ request, they played generation-old home songs like “Home! Sweet Home!” and its followers, songs that expressed common sentiments like a yearning for home and the wish to reenter the past. On at least one occasion, Union and Confederate camp bands positioned in audible proximity performed “Home! Sweet Home!” simultaneously to the cheers of both soldiers. One observer describes how the hills “echoed and re-echoed that

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responsive chord to which even the hearts of enemies could beat in unison.” For the
length of a song, “Home! Sweet Home!” paused the Civil War.⁹

Well into the twentieth century, “Home! Sweet Home!” could boast unrivaled
cultural ubiquity. Generations of Americans born too late to experience the song’s initial
1820s craze or its Civil War resurgence could find the tune in classical and popular
music, literature, and theatre, not to mention the newfangled media of radio, film, and
television. Concertgoing adults heard it quoted in pieces like Charles Ives’s Fourth
Symphony (1916) or Aaron Copland’s *Music for Movies* (1942).¹⁰ Children read about it
in the *Little House* novels of Laura Ingalls Wilder and, depending on how lenient their
parents were, heard it as background music in *Looney Tunes* cartoons.¹¹ Virtually
everyone, wittingly or not, memorized the song’s final line by watching the quintessential
Hollywood musical, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), adapted from L. Frank Baum’s children’s
book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). In that film, the protagonist Dorothy apparates
from the marvelously Technicolor land of Oz to her drab but apparently advantageous
black-and-white home in dustbowl Kansas. All she needs to do is tap her heels three
times and repeat the magic phrase: “There’s no place like home, there’s no place like
home.” To hammer home the reference, a lone violin quotes the opening melody of
“Home! Sweet Home!” over otherworldly whole-tone harmonies. After a century of
enchanting audiences, “Home! Sweet Home!” was literally casting a spell.

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The universal and long-lasting popularity of “Home! Sweet Home!”—spanning generations, technologies, media, earthshaking social shifts, and drastic changes in perception—avoids easy explanation. Musicologists have tried to attribute the song’s success to some inherent quality in the music, to fascinating if unconvincing results. Richard Crawford’s valiant effort is the best attempt so far. He argues that audiences flocked to the song because it so effectively manifests several key domestic virtues that, taken together, constitute a recognizable sense of home. In his interpretation, the song’s exact four-bar phrases and strict *perpetuum mobile* sixteenth-note accompaniment project order and stability, while the conservative harmonic vocabulary (I, ii, IV, V) and narrow melodic range (an octave) suggest humble simplicity. Crawford wittily notes that the tonic or “home” pitch is both the upper and lower bound of the melody; whether the melody reaches for a climactic high or settles down low, it finds its way back home.  

Crawford’s analytic observations never ring false, but they are never specific enough. Four-bar phrases, confined melodies, and simple harmonies do not make a hit song—indeed, any number of forgettable, boring songs exhibits all of the formal and melodic characteristics that Crawford enumerates.

Other scholars attribute the song’s popularity to its lyrics. Charles Hamm notes that the lyricist of “Home! Sweet Home!,” the dramatist John Howard Payne, was a lifelong wanderer who was separated from his New York City home during the song’s composition. “Millions of people who had experienced similar longings, brought about by emigration, death, separation during war, or even voluntary exile, found reflections of their feelings in Payne’s poem,” he writes. Again, the explanations fall flat: Payne may

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very well have experienced the hardship of separation, but his lyrics do not evoke those feelings with considerable verisimilitude or poetic flourish. As William W. Austin has noted, some parts of the lyrics are downright puzzling—take the syntactical tangle of the first two lines, the two dependent clauses (“‘Mid pleasures and palaces…” and “Be it ever…”) that fight for semantic space. Perhaps the strongest proof that “Home! Sweet Home!” does not owe its success to its poetry lies in its two most memorable phrases: the title phrase and “There’s no place like home!” Neither says anything especially profound about the home or touches on anything particular to American life. It is unbelievable that millions of people saw their deeply personal longings mirrored by two bromides. Perhaps the best analysis of these two phrases is the simplest: they are catchy phrases set to catchy melodies.

More important than unraveling the amazing popularity of “Home! Sweet Home!” is asking how the most famous song about the American home could say absolutely nothing substantial about it. The subject of the home is not impermeable to artistic inquiry: American literature, for example, is obsessed with defining and challenging the concepts of home. Early American authors, tired of highfalutin political tracts and rarified talk about freedom and opportunity, wanted to know what life in the New World was really like; they placed the home under their artistic microscopes, inaugurating a literary investigation that continues today. Realist novels from W. D. Howells’s *A Modern Instance* (1882) to John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* (1960) to Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) exfoliate family and marital life, exposing American ideals and conflicts within. The many American novels about outsiders—Mark Twain’s picaresque expeditions, Jack Kerouac’s literary road-trips—rethink American myths of freedom and
opportunity while examining the home through the eyes of the homeless. “Home! Sweet Home!” and the home song tradition it inspired never attempt (let alone accomplish) a depiction of the home with such novelistic nuance. As tunes, they are beguiling, unforgettable, and timeless; as reflections on the American home, they are uninformative.

With the dawn of the twentieth century, American music suddenly rose to the challenge of exploring the American home. Perhaps the motivation was purely political. Over the course of the twentieth century, the United States matured from Europe’s little cousin to its superior. With the premiere of the United States on the world stage, it became increasingly imperative for the world to know what defines an “American,” which naturally leads to the question of what constitutes “the American home.” Or perhaps the shift can be explained on stylistic terms: as American classical music developed throughout the twentieth century, reaching new heights of ambition, recognition, and literary depth, composers were in a position to treat the American home with the complexity it deserved.

Whatever motivated these composers, their exploration of the American home produced a staggeringly miscellaneous result: depictions of the home as diverse and extensive as the United States itself. In some pieces, home is vaguely suggested; in others, it stands in the background; in many, it is the explicit subject of investigation or attack. Many depict the home by means of contrast: American versus European, past versus present, or self versus other. Others walk inside the American home and lock the doors, making no comparison to anything outside. Many incorporated literature and theater into their pieces, using visual and narrative elements to better realize the American home, but their sources vary immensely across time and place. None of the

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depictions attempt to generalize on the level of “Home! Sweet Home!,” but they do 
scrutinize a wide-ranging assortment of subjects: a single consciousness, a single family, 
a single neighborhood, or a single city. The common threads between these subjects trace 
back to central aspects of the American experience; the differences point to an essentially 
American heterogeneity.

In the following essays I investigate four depictions of the American home by 
four twentieth-century American composers: Charles Ives (1874-1954), Aaron Copland 
(1900-1990), Samuel Barber (1910-1981), and Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990). The 
object of each essay is to present one composer’s depiction of the home in exacting 
detail, comparing composers and compositions along the way. Trying to understand a 
composer’s idea of home requires understanding his life and his style: his real home and 
his musical home, respectively. Accordingly, I expound in detail the backgrounds of 
these four composers, although my primary focus is analytical, not historical.

These four composers do not map out a neat thematic, generic, or stylistic plot; 
that is, the story of American music has multiple narrators. So I proceed chronologically, 
starting with “The Alcotts,” the third movement of Charles Ives’s Sonata No. 2 for Piano, 
“Concord, Mass., 1840-1860,” or Concord Sonata (1920). A serene oasis in the middle of 
an otherwise knotty piano sonata, “The Alcotts” is Ives’s musical fabrication of the home 
of the Alcotts, the mythic American literary family that included philosopher Bronson 
Alcott and author Louisa May Alcott. The movement is a dense tracery of associations 
and allusions, spanning American hymnody, Beethoven’s masterworks, and nineteenth-
century popular tunes. It locates the American home in an interstice: between America 
and Europe, between past and present, between real and imagined.
Next, I investigate “Story of Our Town,” the primary musical cue from Aaron Copland’s score for the 1940 film *Our Town*, based on Thornton Wilder’s play of the same name. In *Our Town*, Copland, whose “Americana style” has become the *de facto* soundtrack for the uncharted American frontier, portrays the fictionalized New England idyll of Grover’s Corners with music that projects openness and possibility. The result is a silver-screen utopia, which I argue is incompatible with an intuitive understanding of the home.

I hold Copland in mind when I turn to Samuel Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1947), a “lyric rhapsody” for soprano and orchestra based on a prose-poem by American author James Agee. For Barber, the piece played a dual, contradictory role: it was simultaneously a personal lament to his recently deceased father and a public expression of confusion, wistfulness, and shame for a shell-shocked generation struggling to comprehend the atrocities of World War II. Agee’s retrospective look at turn-of-the-century suburban life provides Barber with the perfect platform for an exploration of nostalgia, both private and public. The chapter concludes with a comparison of Copland and Barber, who are often lumped together in discussions of twentieth-century American music. I argue that, concerning their thoughts on the American home, they could not be more different.

In the final chapter, I conduct a scene-by-scene walkthrough of Bernstein’s short opera *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952). Bernstein’s irreverent take on the conformities and complacencies of 1950s suburbia mixes the composer’s pop-song legerdemain with serious charges against the American Dream, national values, and the viability of a stable home. Unlike the three previous works, *Trouble in Tahiti* does not look longingly at the
past, but soberly at the present. For Bernstein, home is the disjointed present day, one that

As a conclusion, I chronicle the early career of Elvis Presley, a monolithic

musician who shook up American society as few did before or since. He stands for a
coterie of wandering composers and performers, America’s “mobile musicians,” who
answered the question of the home by rejecting it altogether and hitting the road.

The problem with a specific definition of the American home is that any idea of
home, even the most rudimentary, contains connotations and denotations galore. “Home”
might mean a house, a neighborhood, a nation, a shelter, a relationship, a family, a way of
life, a moment, an era, a memory, an ideology, a religion, a language, a sense of freedom,
a sense of confinement, a set of familiar habits, or even the legendary American Dream.
In the four pieces I investigate, the word “home” packages numerous meanings into an
intricate and inextricable assembly. In Charles Ives’s “The Alcotts,” for example, home is
a landmark house in a landmark town, a famous family, a figment of the imagination, a
product of Transcendentalist philosophy, even a young girl’s favorite tune, played on the
family spinet piano. Not once does Ives’s home take on only one of these meanings;
often, it seems to take on all of them at once. To understand these four composers, one
has to leave the definition of the home open, welcoming, and uninhibited. In her essay
“Music and Musicians in Exile: The Romantic Legacy of a Double Life,” Linda Goehr
offers an appealingly spacious definition of the home: “Unreflectively,” Goehr writes,
“‘home’ simply names a place and a life once lived; reflectively, it names a continually
transforming set of bonds organized by activities, conversations, and relationships that
trace memories of past, establish patterns of present significance, and suggest desires for the future.”

Even musicologists who maintain a broad definition of home can list its tendencies. Goehr, for one, notes that home can be “largely synonymous with ‘family’.” Hermann Danuser, employing the critical term Heimat (German for “homeland”), follows in Martin Heidegger’s footsteps by connecting one’s Heimat to one’s language. The four American homes I investigate share some common features: a focus on the past evinced as nostalgia or imagination; the careful interplay between individuality, family, and society; the balance and opposition between genders; and the paramount importance of memory and perception. Since they appear so consistently and frequently, one might argue that these four tendencies of the American home are indeed requirements—but as I will contend in the epilogue, there is always good reason to doubt our strongest beliefs about the American home. After all, the United States is a conglomeration of disparate, often opposing forces; it defies the prospect of a quintessential national experience or character. Any statement that ventures to set the American home in stone reeks of generalization.

If my definition of the home seems to be unimaginably vast, then I am starting this study off on the right foot. Music that tells us about the home is music that tells us about ourselves: where our stories began, what has made us into what we are, what we seek solace from, how we imagine our day-to-day lives. Loosely defined, home is where we live. There can be no greater subject.

15 Ibid., 66-67.
Chapter One: The Biggest Little Place:

“The Alcotts” of Charles Ives’s *Concord Sonata*

In 1920, when Charles Ives privately published and disseminated copies of his Sonata No. 2 for Piano, “Concord, Mass., 1840-1860” (often termed the *Concord Sonata*) and its hefty accompanying booklet, *Essays Before a Sonata*, he was almost completely unknown in the contemporary music scene. If any of the composers, pianists, and critics who received copies of the sonata recognized the composer’s name, it was probably because of Ives’s prominent day job: he was a pioneering insurance salesman and a leading partner at the profitable firm of Ives and Myrick. By night, Ives penned symphonies, sonatas, and songs, almost all of which looked back to the bygone America of the nineteenth century by mimicking Civil-War-era popular tunes, the hectic polyphony of rival marching bands, and the microtonal shrieks of train whistles.¹ He was a prolific but private composer: many of his compositions, the *Concord Sonata* included, remained unperformed for years. When Ives did publish his compositions, they were often shunned for their unremitting complexity and dissonance, which disturbed some performers and nauseated others. The *Concord Sonata*, for instance, is neither performer-nor audience-friendly: though published in 1920, it was not premiered until 1939, after the pianist John Kirkpatrick ventured to grapple with Ives’s maddening score for almost a decade. Yet not all movements of this behemoth of a piece are equally frightening. In “The Alcotts,” the sonata’s slow movement, Ives employs concise and uncharacteristically simple music to evoke an imagined, idealized nineteenth-century

American home. It is not the first depiction of the home in American music, but it is one of the most complete: in its five pages we can discern Europe and America, parents and children, men and women, the past and the present. It is a movement jam-packed with associations and contradictions, enough to do the American home justice. Though it is buried inside three movements with all the trappings of twentieth-century maximalism, it is worth excavating. Simply put, it is the perfect place for our study to begin.

* * *

Ives summarized the *Concord Sonata* as “an attempt to present (one person’s) impression of the spirit of transcendentalism that is associated in the minds of many with Concord, Mass., of over a half century ago.”\(^2\) The sonata’s first movement, “Emerson,” is Ives’s musical take on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Concord’s resident essayist, poet, and philosopher, and the man who helmed the Transcendentalist School, the leading American philosophical movement of the nineteenth century. Casting Emerson’s distinctive writing into music is a hugely tall order: Emerson’s allusive, verbose, self-contradictory, endlessly discursive writing is famously difficult, and Ives’s musical translations add another layer of complexity. But Ives rises to the challenge, unleashing a list of techniques that reads like a modernist glossary: polyrhythms, polytonality, atonality, whole-tone scales, quarter tones, and aleatory processes.

Like a characteristic Emersonian sentence, the first page of the movement seems to be saying at least four things at once (see ex. 1). It begins with *pesante* octaves in the left hand playing a descending atonal line and equally weighty octaves in the right playing an ascending whole-tone scale. In the space in between, Ives’s original motives

and chromatic lines intermingle with recognizable melodies: the short-short-short-long of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, popular songs nearly a century old, and pentatonic snatches of American hymns. But even these familiar melodies are tweaked into unfamiliar sounds, due to Ives’s innovative harmonies and penchant for strong dissonances. (Ives famously wrote to his copyist: “Please don’t try to make things nice! All the wrong notes are right. Just copy as I have—I want it that way.”)³ The music that follows this opening salvo is evenly split between passages with barlines that represent Emerson’s poetry and passages without barlines that represent his prose. In neither case does the movement ever ease up. From beginning to end, “Emerson” is difficult music.

Example 1: The opening phrases of “Emerson” extend on and on, like a characteristic Emersonian sentence (p. 1, systems 1-2)⁴

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³ Quoted in Frank R. Rossiter, Charles Ives and His America (New York: Liveright, 1975), 154.
⁴ Since the majority of the Concord Sonata is written without barlines, most references to the score will use the page number followed by the system number. On the rare occasions I cite a barred section of the score, after the system number I will include a measure number that refers not to the overall measure count of the movement but to the measure count of that system.
The vertiginously virtuosic second movement, “Hawthorne,” is even more difficult. In order to depict the pitch-black fantasies of Nathanael Hawthorne—nineteenth-century novelist, short-story writer, and another noted resident of Concord, Massachusetts—Ives writes a movement that amplifies the modernist musical techniques of “Emerson” to a manic extreme. On paper, the result looks like a parodically difficult nineteenth-century piano showpiece. Ives’s endnotes alone read like a list of punchlines. They not only ask the pianist to play the movement “as fast as possible” and certain chords “as hard as possible,” but also demand the pianist to instill his playing with almost impossibly specific programmatic details, such as conjuring “a Friendly Ghost in the Church Yard,” a “Drum Corps,” and “the Old Cornet Band.” 5 Worst of all, Ives coyly asks the performer to play “not too literally,” to comply with expression marks “as little as possible,” and to liberally follow “the relation 2:1 between the 32nd and 16th notes.” For pianists instilled with a dogmatic obedience to the score, Ives’s request bordered on heresy. Those years of diligent score-reading and practicing with a metronome were of no help here.

The general sound of “Hawthorne” is atonal murkiness, from which familiar snippets of song float up to the surface: bits of ragtime, Stephen Foster tunes, hymns, and the now-expected short-short-short-long of Beethoven’s Fifth. The quotations fleetingly arrive in warped forms and unconventional settings, as if floating around in the haze of the unconscious. These musical signs of human life are uncomfortably juxtaposed with freakish sounds unlike any heard before from a piano, in America, Europe, or anywhere else. Of these, the most famous are the chords played “by using a strip of board 14½

inches long and heavy enough to press the keys down without striking.” A board of exactly that length allows the pianist to conjure massive clusters of sixteen white keys or twelve black keys, resembling the unpitched clang of distant bells. (As if handling a 14¾-inch-long board at the piano was not hassle enough, Ives once opined that “it is better if another piano—off stage—can play these bell chords.” No recording or performance on record follows Ives’s suggestion.) For possibly the first time in musical history, a composer had devised piano chords that were humanly impossible to play. Piano playing had evolved into a new era: it had learned to use tools (see. ex. 2).

Example 2: In “Hawthorne,” the pianist is asked to play chords of up to sixteen notes “by using a strip of board 14¾ inches long” (p. 25, system 1)

Only once does “Hawthorne” relent from this frenzy. Midway through the movement, there is a complete turnaround. A dizzying stretch of atonal counterpoint written without barlines grinds to a halt on a dissonant nine-tone chord, held $\text{ffff}$. Out of nowhere comes the opening motive to Beethoven’s Fifth, set as a diatonic, monorhythmic hymn, played $\text{ppp}$, “very slowly,” and in some of the only barred measures of the entire

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movement. According to one of Ives’s endnotes, the effect should sound as if a hymn is “heard over a distant hill just after a heavy storm.” After pages of slippery atonality, “Hawthorne” has reached one of its sole points of strength and security, a moment with all the might of a Beethoven symphony and all the conviction of a Christian hymn. But the calm is as transient as the Foster tunes swimming in this music’s unconscious: after fewer than three bars of comfortably tonal 6/8, the music abruptly reverts to atonality, arrhythmia, and terrible $fff$ dynamics (see ex. 3). Ives was right to compare the perpetual movement of this movement to “a heavy storm.” These three meager measures constitute the eye of that storm, all too short.

![Example 3: “…a Hymn is sometimes heard over a distant hill just after a heavy storm” (p. 33, systems 1-2)](image)

More than anything else in the *Concord Sonata*, these two sections from “Hawthorne” left the critics and composers of Ives’s time befuddled, incensed, or hysterical with laughter. Even classical-music critics enamored with outré and exotic
sounds had difficulty relating Ives’s sound to anything they had heard previously. So perhaps it is no surprise that recent writers always compare the Concord Sonata to the extremes of classical and popular music: its pianistic breadth has been compared to Franz Liszt, its mix of music and mysticism to Alexander Scriabin, its playful virtuosity to Art Tatum, and its audacious harmonies to heavy metal.⁷

When Ives first printed copies of the Concord Sonata and Essays Before a Sonata, most reviewers treated the package as a joke, an offense to the Western tradition, a sheaf of misprinted pages, or a certification of the composer’s delusion. The Essays, considered by some to be the longest and most elaborate program ever written for a musical composition, did nothing to help the piece’s reception.⁸ Thus the response was overwhelmingly negative—so negative that the Concord Sonata is a strong contender for the title of the most viciously panned composition of the twentieth century. One particularly scandalized reviewer told Ives to drown himself. One reviewer said that 98 percent of the sonata would be “sadly familiar…in households where the baby or the cat has access to the piano.”⁹ In 1939, a young Harvard undergraduate named Leonard Bernstein mentioned the piece in his senior thesis. “It is tiring, overlong, and a challenge

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⁷ For Liszt, see David Michael Hertz, “Ives’s Concord Sonata and the Texture of Music,” in Charles Ives and His World; for Scriabin, see Schonberg, “Natural American, Natural Rebel, Natural Avant-gardist”; for Art Tatum, see John Rockwell, “A Pianist Juxtaposes Charles Ives and Art Tatum,” New York Times, 26 March 1990, http://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/26/arts/reviews-music-a-pianist-juxtaposes-charles-ives-and-art-tatum.html (accessed April 10, 2011); for heavy metal, see Geoffrey Block, “Remembrance of Dissonances Past: The Two Published Editions of Ives’s Concord Sonata,” in Philip Lambert, ed., Ives Studies (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1997), 49n52. Block humorously writes: “These chords are analogous to the ‘power chords’ described by Robert Walser in connection with heavy metal. In Walser’s description, power chords are ‘produced by playing the musical interval of a perfect fourth or fifth on a heavily amplified and distorted electric guitar…used by all of the bands that are ever called heavy metal and, until heavy metal’s enormous influence on other musical genres in the late 1980s, by comparatively few musicians outside the genre.’ One of these few was Ives, who, although he did not use an amplified and distorted guitar, certainly exhibited a precocious predilection for piano power chords.”
⁹ These reviews are quoted in Burkholder, Charles Ives and His World, 280 and 287.
to any pianist,” he wrote.¹⁰ (Decades later, as the chief conductor of New York Philharmonic, Bernstein would be singlehandedly responsible for invigorating a new Ives craze. He would eventually dub Ives “our Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson of music.”¹¹) Even after shamelessly showering disdain on “Emerson” and “Hawthorne,” reviewers still had some leftover for “Thoreau,” the sonata’s final movement. On the last two pages of “Thoreau,” after nearly an hour of solo piano, a flute player takes over one of the sonata’s main lyric melodies above the piano’s ghostly accompaniment. For Ives, the flute addition was a heartfelt programmatic homage to Transcendentalist author Henry David Thoreau, who often played the flute in his secluded home near Concord’s Walden Pond. To Ives’s contemporaries, it was a laughably overindulgent addition. “A flute player must be hired for a few bars at the end of the sonata— for what?” asked one critic, who must not have read the Essays too closely.¹²

The one movement of the Concord Sonata that was spared a heavy dose of critical bile was the slow third movement, “The Alcotts.” The movement is named after Concord’s eminent hyperliterary family, which included the philosopher, author, and progressive educator Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa Alcott, whose novel Little Women (1868) recreates her childhood in Concord’s storied Orchard House. The music Ives dedicates to them is as shocking as any other movement in the Concord Sonata, but not because it requires any pianistic pyrotechnics, unusual wooden apparatuses, or supplementary musicians waiting in the wings. What makes “The Alcotts” so shocking is its utter simplicity. Programmatically, this simplicity means a turn away from Ives’s

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¹² Quoted in Burkholder, Charles Ives and His World, 287. Ives mentions Thoreau’s flute playing three times in the Essays, including at the very beginning of the section marked “Thoreau.”
philosophical and literary ruminations in “Emerson,” “Hawthorne,” and “Thoreau” to a simple depiction of home and family life, nothing more or less. As Ives puts it in the *Essays*:

> We dare not attempt to follow the philosophic raptures of Bronson Alcott—unless you will assume that his apotheosis will show how “practical” his vision in this world would be in the next. And so we won’t try to reconcile the music sketch of the Alcotts with much besides the memory of that home under the elms—the Scotch songs and the family hymns that were sung at the end of each day.\(^{13}\)

Musically, this means that for once in the sonata there is a perceptible sense of form, meter, rhythm, melody, and key. Ives’s habitually dense textures slim down to navigable thinness; finally, which line is the melody and which is the accompaniment is barely questionable. These seismic shifts are evident from the movement’s very first chords (see ex. 4).

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\(^{13}\) Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata*, 48.
The opening sounds like a return to the eye of the storm in “Hawthorne.” While the calm in “Hawthorne” was cut off almost immediately, the easygoing chord progression here is given space to expand and relax. Absent is the thorny modernism of the Concord Sonata’s other three movements, which sounded progressive and forward-looking. This passage, to the contrary, seems to face longingly backwards: it is harmonized with the straightforward harmonies of a classic American hymn and arranged in the manner of an amateur piano piece from the nineteenth century. Critics have even likened its carefree style to a childlike improvisation. This seeming simplicity notwithstanding, contradictions and confusions still abound, most clearly in the opening major-third descent, which seems to hearken back to several different melodies: Charles Zeuner’s Missionary Chant (1832), Simeon B. Marsh’s hymn Martyn (1834), and, yet again, the opening motive of Beethoven’s Fifth, which recurs so frequently in Ives’s sonata that critics have given it its own designation, Ives’s “epic motive.” But the associations triggered by this music—safety, spirituality, family, and most crucial of all, home—put those concerns to rest. Even when “The Alcotts” strays from this simple opening statement into modernist territory—there is an inkling of this shift on the far right of example 4, when the right hand is asked to play a B-flat major melody on top of the left hand’s A-flat major accompaniment—the music exudes a sense of security that we only come across at home, a feeling that the Alcotts found in Orchard House in Concord, singing hymns around the family’s spinet piano.

16 This designation originates in Henry Cowell and Sidney Cowell, Charles Ives and His Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 191.
“The Alcotts” was not completely free from the critical scorn that seemed to follow the *Concord Sonata* wherever it went. Virgil Thomson, modernist American composer and vocal fan of the complexities of the sonata’s three knottier movements, once referred to “The Alcotts” as the “comic relief” of the sonata.17 Yet the sincerity and simplicity of this movement, especially when contrasted with the hectic “Hawthorne” that precedes it and the experimental “Thoreau” that follows it, make “The Alcotts” the hardest of the sonata’s movements to belittle or disregard. The shift from the excess of “Hawthorne” to the purity of “The Alcotts” feels like a long-awaited return home. To understand why this home seems just about perfect, we need a better understanding of the Alcott family and Concord, Massachusetts in the mid-nineteenth century—and who better to give us a tour than Charles Ives himself?

“The biggest little place in America”: Concord as a model American home

For a town its size, the New England village of Concord, Massachusetts can boast abnormally high importance in American literature, philosophy, and history. Though tiny, out of the way, and secluded, Concord has nevertheless featured prominently in the European settling of North America, the American Revolution, and the Transcendentalist School of the nineteenth century. It was the place where many classic American texts were written; it was even the setting of many, including Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1853), an American children’s novel and the paradigmatic American autobiography, respectively. The unlikelihood that a small town could also be a monumental landmark in America’s creation and identity led many nineteenth-century authors to attribute a supernatural quality to the town, be it black

magic, miraculously good fortune, or a special connection to God, nature, or the essence of man. Even Ives, writing the *Essays Before a Sonata* in 1920, detected something remarkable in the air in Concord. Naturally, he described that mystical quality in musical terms. He heard that feeling as a tune, one he called the “human faith melody”:

> All around you, under the Concord sky, there still floats the influence of that human faith melody, transcendent and sentimental enough for the enthusiast or the cynic respectively, reflecting an innate hope—a common interest in common things and common men—a tune the Concord bards are ever playing, while they pound away at the immensities with a Beethovenlike sublimity, and with, may we say, a vehemence and perseverance—for that part of greatness is not so difficult to emulate.\(^{18}\)

The “human faith melody” is one of the primary musical characters in “The Alcotts.” Every aspect that Ives relates to it—the connection with nature, the universality of “common things and common men,” the European influence of the “Beethovenlike sublimity”—helps us understand the home of “The Alcotts,” and requires substantial philosophical unpacking.

Because of its internal variety and its intricate mythology, Concord has always been a difficult place to sum up in writing. It seems to have the complexity not of a place but of a well-developed character from a dense nineteenth-century novel. So perhaps it is no surprise that one of the most successful descriptions of Concord comes from Henry James, the novelist and short-story writer who is distinguished as one of his century’s greatest depicters of human consciousness. James devotes half a chapter of his travel-writing collection *The American Scene* to Concord, which he finds more vibrant than any other town in the United States and even a few major American cities. In fact, Concord has such life to it that James can imagine conducting an entire conversation with the

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town. In the passage below, James reassures the town, which is feeling self-conscious and insecure about its size:

Your “size”? Why, you’re the biggest little place in America—with only New York and Boston and Chicago, by what I make out, to surpass you; and the country is lucky indeed to have you, in your sole and single felicity, for if it hadn’t, where in the world should we go, inane and unappeased, for the particular communication of which you have the secret? The country is colossal, and you but a microscopic speck on the hem of its garment, yet there’s nothing else like you, take you all round, for we see you complacently, with the naked eye, whereas there are vast sprawling, bristling areas, great grey “centres of population” that spread, on the map, like irremediable grease-spots, which fail utterly of any appeal to our vision or any control of it, leaving it to pass them by as if they were not.19

Being “the biggest little place in America” was not the only contradiction in Concord. Despite its name, Concord actually houses a heavy philosophical discord, one between a proud military past and a history of intellectualism and pacifism. In American history Concord first appears as a battleground, the backdrop of the Battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, the first military engagements of the American Revolution. The specter of a brutal military past haunted the Concord of the Transcendentalists, and haunts Concord still. If you walk into Concord today, you might see The Concord Minute Man of 1775, the first major statue of sculptor Daniel Chester French, who would go on to carve the massive Abraham Lincoln who inhabits the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Standing high above the Concord River, Minute Man appears just as regal as that later president. Below him is inscribed the first stanza of Emerson’s “Concord Hymn” (1836). Dedicated to the heroes of the Battle of Concord

and commissioned for a memorial in their honor, Emerson’s poem coined a now-famous phrase that is universally associated with World War I:

> By the rude bridge that arched the flood,  
> Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,  
> Here once the embattled farmers stood,  
> And fired the shot heard round the world.  

(ll. 1-4, italics mine)²⁰

Yet many Concord residents were not at all proud of their hometown’s militaristic past. Most notable among them was Henry David Thoreau, author of the treatise *Civil Disobedience* (1849) and a well-known conscientious objector and pacifist. Another was Amos Bronson Alcott, the idiosyncratic patriarch of the Alcott family, and a person for whom violence, conflict, and discrimination were unthinkable. He was a staunch supporter of abolition, equal rights for women, vegetarianism, and environmentalism, back when all four were highly radical causes. Most famously, he treated children as if they were no different from adults. During Alcott’s brief stint as the head of Boston’s progressive Temple School, Alcott taught children of eight and nine about the dialogues of Plato, the poetry of William Wordsworth, and the validity of the Gospels, asking caustic questions and encouraging heated discussions. When his tenure at Temple ended prematurely, the Alcott family moved to Concord, eventually settling in Orchard House (see fig. 1), where Alcott’s daughter Louisa May would write and set *Little Women*, among other novels. Over the fireplace in his study, Alcott inscribed an epigram by a fellow Concord resident, the poet William Ellery Channing: “The hills are reared, the

valley scooped, in vain, / If Learning’s altars vanish from the plain.” Even more than the Temple School, Orchard House was Alcott’s shrine to education.21

Figure 1: Orchard House, as it stands today (source: http://www.louisamayalcott.org/)

Among the characters of Ives’s Concord Sonata, Alcott seems to be the odd one out. Unlike Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau, the garrulous Bronson Alcott did not leave behind a great written legacy. (Many, possibly including Ives, believe that Alcott’s greatest contribution to literature was his daughter.) As Ives quips in the Essays: “If the dictagraph had been perfected in Bronson Alcott’s time, he might now be a great writer.

As it is, he goes down as Concord’s greatest talker.” Perhaps it is Bronson’s underdog quality that made the Alcotts’ home so poignant and relatable for Ives. As psychiatrist and musicologist Stephen Feder convincingly speculates in his biography on Ives, the relationship between Louisa May and Bronson Alcott—the successful child, the fruitless father—mirrors the relationship between Ives and his father, the amateur musician and bandleader George Ives. Feder singles out a sentence in the Essays Before a Sonata that applies perfectly to Bronson and George: “So it seems that his idealism had some substantial virtues, even if he couldn’t make a living.” For Ives, these “substantial virtues”—compassion, tolerance, the will to help and educate—made the elder Alcott the epitome of paternity. And it made the Alcotts and their famous household the model American home of the nineteenth century.

The section of Essays Before a Sonata devoted to “The Alcotts” is almost like a visitor’s guide to Concord, past and present, with Ives as the voluble tour-guide. When Ives reaches Orchard House on his walking tour, he cannot help but describe the moment with musical terminology:

There is a commonplace beauty about “Orchard House”—a kind of spiritual sturdiness underlying its quaint picturesqueness—a kind of common triad of the New England homestead, whose overtones tell us that there must have been something aesthetic fibered in the Puritan severity—the self-sacrificing part of the ideal—a value that seems to stir a deeper feeling, a stronger sense of being nearer some perfect truth than a Gothic cathedral or an Etruscan villa.

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22 Ives, Essays Before a Sonata, 45.
25 Ives, Essays Before a Sonata, 47.
There is a fraught disagreement here on both musical and national lines. Based on the charming but by no means sublime house in figure 1, it is hard to believe that Orchard House is indeed “nearer some perfect truth” than the Gothic cathedral and the Etruscan villa, two formidable, distinctly European structures. The *Essays* are not an exhaustive attack on all of European culture; again and again, Ives’s benchmarks of substantial, timeless music are the sublime symphonies and sonatas of Beethoven. But by contrasting these European landmarks with Concord’s “Puritan severity” and “commonplace beauty,” Ives distances his music and the Alcotts’ home from their European predecessors, making a case for their Americanism.

As Ives walks around Orchard House, he imagines what life would have been like for the Alcotts, giving particular praise to the Alcott children’s capacity for imagination:

> Within the house, on every side, lie remembrances of what imagination can do for the better amusement of fortunate children who have to do for themselves—much-needed lessons in these days of automatic, ready-made, easy entertainment which deaden rather than stimulate the creative faculty. And there sits the little old spinet-piano Sophia Thoreau gave to the Alcott children, on which Beth played the old Scotch airs, and played at the *Fifth Symphony.*

At first, this passage from the *Essays* seems to be nothing more than a crotchety jab at modern entertainment. But this passage’s focus on imagination expresses much more than a simple joke. After all, Ives does not document his own home in “The Alcotts.” Instead, he looks back to a mythic family of American history and fabricates the details of their lives. In essence, he does what the Alcott children did to stave off boredom: he imagines. But what Ives imagines is more serious than simple childish distractions: he imagines the perfect American home. We can boil down Ives’s imagined home to three

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26 Ibid.
key aspects: equality between the masculine and the feminine; a compatibility of individual experience with the frameworks of families, communities, and religion; and a coexistence of American and European elements. Knowing Ives’s penchant for obfuscation, it is often difficult to see where these three aspects crop up in “The Alcotts.” Accordingly, the object of this chapter is to hunt them down.

While Henry James believed that Concord was “the biggest little place in America,” for Ives the biggest little place in America was home. It was a tiny house in a quaint village that could somehow spark thousands of associations, ranging across religion, nature, literature, and history, from the present day to the American Revolution, from Concord to Europe and back.

**Searching for Ives’s feminine sound**

“A man’s choice of heroes often reveals his temperament,” begins one survey of Ives. Implicitly or explicitly, almost every study of Ives would agree. Ever since the premiere performance of the *Concord Sonata* publicized Ives’s respect for the great men of nineteenth-century American literature, the customary way to understand Ives has been to understand the men he admired. This method of inquiry proves to be fruitful for two reasons. First, the Transcendentalists’ influence seeped into every aspect of Ives’s life, not only his taste in literature: Transcendentalist ideas emerge in Ives’s family history, his personal habits, and, most crucially, his music. Critics have compared Ives’s behavior to idolatry or canonization, but this misses how personally close Ives felt to these authors. In his autobiographical *Memos*, for instance, Ives discusses the Transcendentalists as if

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speaking about neighbors or family members, citing his “years of friendship with Emerson, Alcott, Thoreau [and] Hawthorne.” Ives was born too late to literally enjoy “years of friendship” with Emerson, but his grandmother heard one of Emerson’s lectures in the 1850s; later Ives’s uncle Joe met Emerson in Boston; not long after, Emerson possibly stayed a night in Joe’s house in Danbury, Connecticut, a small town comparable to Concord. Whether Ives inherited Transcendentalist tendencies from his family or his undergraduate professors is unclear, but he undeniably took those beliefs to heart. Even when he was an active partner in his insurance firm, Ives lived a life of seclusion, mimicking Thoreau’s rugged individualism and Emerson’s self-reliance. Ives’s biographer Frank R. Rossiter claims that these Transcendentalist virtues are the source of Ives’s unapologetically individual music. Others argue that Ives’s enterprise in the Concord Sonata is based on Emerson’s essays on seven “Representative Men” (1850), in which Emerson singles out some of history’s most excellent men—Shakespeare, Plato, and Napoleon, for example—from whom his less-than-excellent readership might learn a thing or two. As Feder wittily writes: “Emerson was Charles Ives’s ‘Representative Man.’”

Second, Ives had a militant aversion to anything he considered feminine, unmanly, emasculated, or weak. To Ives, life and music were better off masculine, strong, youthful, and powerful. These biases seem to infect everything that Ives wrote: public essays, private correspondence, program notes, and musical scores. On some

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29 Feder, The Life of Charles Ives, 144.
30 Rossiter, Charles Ives and His America, 105.
32 Feder, The Life of Charles Ives, 144.
subjects, Ives’s biases rarely differ from the social leanings of the time, though they are almost always amplifications. When matters turn to music, however, Ives’s opinions on gender become individualistic and fanatic. To Ives, the masculine sounds of Western music included dissonance, maximalism, and experimentalism, which he heard epitomized in the works of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Among the composers Ives considered feminine were Mozart, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, and Chopin (Ives: “one just naturally thinks of him with a skirt on”); sounds he found to be feminine included ninth and eleventh chords, the majority of operas, almost all string quartets, and anything that the critics deemed “beautiful.”

Worst of all was the classical-music mainstream industry, especially its female patrons, consumers, and critics. With their reactionary musical tastes and intolerance for new sounds, they were constant objects of Ives’s derision. In one letter, Ives wordily sums up their tastes as “nice-copy-cat-European-‘salon’-pretty little-velvet-sounds to please the pansy ears and help the prima-donna-commercialized-conductors get their money easier.” Ives rarely referred to these tastemakers by name, instead lumping them together in the sardonic persona of “Rollo,” the prim, unimaginative, tiresomely well-behaved hero of a series of nineteenth-century children books. Rollo makes an infamous appearance in the second movement of Ives’s Second String Quartet (1913), in

34 For Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Chopin, opera, and ninth and eleventh chords, see Schonberg, “Natural American, Natural Rebel, Natural Avant-gardist,” 71-72. For string quartets and beautiful, see Taruskin, The Oxford History of Western Music, vol. 4, 255.
35 Letter to John Becker, in Charles Ives and His World, 237. Ives’s daughter Edith took down this letter for her father. Her preface for the letter reads: “I am acting as secretary for Daddy. I told him I would take down everything except the swear words, and if he feels they are very necessary I will substitute them by exclamation points!” It is unclear whether this final exclamation point stands for a swear word.
36 Rollo is described in Rossiter, Charles Ives and His America, 149, and Taruskin, The Oxford History of Western Music, vol. 4, 255.
which he is “played” by the second violin. He communicates with flowery, ornamental passages, square rhythms, and tempo markings like “Andante emasculata” and “Largo sweetota.” Rollo is juxtaposed with the rest of the quartet, whose syncopations, dissonances, and vigorous tempos (“Allegro con fisto”) represent Ives’s conception of musical machismo. This marks the zenith of Ives’s misogyny, the point at which it sought expression not only in his words but also in his music.

Ives’s aversion to what he saw as the emasculation of classical music has taken over much of the discourse about the composer. Many cite it as the primary reason that Ives never became a full-time composer, instead opting for what struck him as a more manly vocation, the insurance business.37 (Ives was not alone among his contemporaries in viewing classical music and composition as feminine occupations; Rossiter brusquely asserts that the prevailing view in the United States was that “classical music was for sissies and women.”)38 But even though Ives’s opinions on gender influenced this key moment in his life, and even though he often took his inexcusable prejudices to repulsive degrees, these biases did not inflect every composition he wrote. Ives was not, as Ransom Wilson claims, “marred by an unrelenting machismo” that left him unable “to allow any tenderness into his music for fear of showing an emotion that was supposedly feminine.”39 In several compositions Ives demonstrates his capacity for the sincere expression of qualities we could convincingly call feminine, as well as marital love and other sentiments that transcend and unite genders.

37 Alex Ross, The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century (New York: Picador, 2007), 141-42.
There is no better example of this than the middle section of “The Alcotts,” which immediately follows the first triumphant statement of the “human faith melody,” set here in B-flat major with polytonal additions. As that melody settles, the middle voices introduce a lulling whole-tone ostinato, as if the music is drifting off to sleep. The music stills on a B-flat dominant seventh that attains a dreamy, augmented quality with the addition of a high F-sharp. What comes next is the most exceptional section of an exceptional movement, one of the few passages of the sonata with barlines and the only passage of the entire sonata with a key signature (see ex. 5)

Example 5: The opening of the middle section of “The Alcotts” (p. 55, systems 3-4, p. 56, system 1)
The transition into the middle section brings massive musical relief. After two and a half movements with a minimum of barlines, the assured 4/4 meter resembles the four walls of the home: protective, ordered, and comforting. Tonally, the E-flat-major key signature provides two types of reprieve: first, coming from the B-flat major of the first section, the new key marks a soothing move to the subdominant; second, the absence of polytonal and whole-tone elements lends the unadulterated major key a feeling of purity and security. Programmatical, this passage represents the “the little old spinet-piano… on which Beth played the old Scotch airs” that Ives mentioned in the Essays Before a Sonata. J. Peter Burkholder and Gayle Sherwood Magee both attest that the arrangement evokes the style of nineteenth-century amateur piano pieces that Beth would have played. The addition of Scotch snaps—a rhythmic figuration of a stressed sixteenth note followed by an unstressed dotted-eighth note—emphasizes that these are the “Scotch airs” in question.

Does Ives insert this feminine music simply to evoke Beth Alcott as the family pianist? Or is Beth Alcott a representative of all nineteenth-century female musicians? In the nineteenth century, household piano-playing became the wife’s role, due to a society-wide chain reaction. As Richard Crawford succinctly explains in America’s Musical Life, the initial change was, surprisingly, part of an economic revolution. As business moved from private dwellings to capital buildings, office buildings, and factories, working

42 The historical information and quotes in this paragraph are drawn from Richard Crawford, America’s Musical Life (New York: Norton, 2001), 235-39.
middle-class men became less involved with household affairs, leaving domestic affairs to the family women. These duties included decorating the home, especially the parlor, a room of refinement that made up for any shabbiness elsewhere in the house. Eventually, decorating the parlor meant crafting not only delightful sights but delightful sounds; as a result, more women began to play the parlor piano. Sheet-music publishers, working on the assumption that the parlor piano was now exclusively a female activity, tried to capitalize on this social shift by publishing music that they thought aligned with female sensibilities. Most often, this meant simple, sentimental pieces with a strong sense of melody, often based on familiar tunes. The middle section of “The Alcotts” fits this description perfectly: the left hand plays a basic triadic accompaniment while the right hand plays a clear melody that mixes catchy rhythmic gestures with sweeping, lyrical melodies.

What makes this section more than a simple imitation of a nineteenth-century piano piece—and a telling passage on Ives’s thoughts about home—is its witty use of quotation. In his book-length study of the Concord Sonata, Block lists three generally accepted borrowings in the middle section: the Scottish tune “Loch Lomond” (1841), the Wedding March from Wagner’s Lohengrin (1850), and Anthony F. Winnemore’s minstrel song “Stop That Knocking at My Door” (1843) (see fig. 2). Of these quotations, two are easy to interpret: “Loch Lomond” is probably one of the “Scotch airs” mentioned in the Essays Before a Sonata, and “Stop That Knocking at My Door” is likely Ives’s pun on the famous description of Beethoven’s Fifth as “fate knocking” at the door. Ives’s inclusion of a pun in an otherwise sober depiction of the American home is an important addition: it shows that the American home is alive with humor, that it defies the European
seriousness of “fate knocking” at the door in Beethoven’s symphony. As for the quote of Wagner’s *Wedding March*, Block is not as sure, admitting that “the programmatic meaning is unclear.”

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43 Block, *Ives, Concord Sonata*, 50-52.
Wagner’s *Wedding March* can be interpreted in the context of the two other quotations in the middle section using two explanations. The first explanation is strictly programmatic. As Crawford explained, sheet-music publishers trying to attract a new female clientele often based their publications on popular tunes. Ives’s borrowing of three contemporaneous tunes can be explained as an imitation of this practice. More important to our subject, one can also explain these quotations in relation to Ives’s idea of home. The lyrical and extramusical content of these three tunes are all related to love or marriage. Both “Loch Lomond” and “Stop that Knocking at My Door” concern lost, distant love (see below), while Wagner’s *Wedding March* celebrates newly formed love.

Oh, ye’ll tak’ the high road, and I’ll tak’ the low road,
And I’ll be in Scotland afore ye;
But me and my true love will never meet again
On the bonnie, bonnie banks o’ Loch Lomond.

(“Loch Lomond,” first stanza)
I once did lub a colored Gal
Whose name was Suzy Brown,
She came from old Virginny,
She was de fairest in de town…

(“Stop that Knocking at My Door,” ll. 1-4)

By linking this section to three tunes associated with familial and romantic love, Ives implies that the security and purity of home stems from a strong family, built on the balanced roles and cooperation of husband and wife. That is, the program implies Ives’s faith in the institution of marriage.

Many read the Concord Sonata as a representation of Ives’s character, with each of the four movements depicting a different side of the composer. These critics are willing to find Bronson Alcott in Ives’s character—Rossiter, for example, claims that, when Ives married, he became “the transcendental and crotchety old man on his mountaintop, a Bronson Alcott philosophizing while his wife took care of the practical details of life.” But by dedicating the most secure section of his entire sonata to the rest of Bronson’s family, Ives indicates that he also has strong ties with the sensitive novelist Louisa May Alcott, the tender musician Beth Alcott, and the strong Abby May, Bronson’s wife. It should not be overlooked that “The Alcotts” is not named after a great man: it is named after a great family.

Transcendentalist equations I: Individual = Collective = God

It would be difficult to give a brief summary of Transcendentalism, a philosophical school of the modern era that had strong beliefs in inconsistency, duality, self-contradiction, uncertainty, change, subjectivity, and linguistic vagueness. Few other

45 Rossiter, Charles Ives and His America, 178.
philosophical schools successfully based an entire intellectual platform on the impossibility of conclusive statements or objective knowledge. The most famous maxim of the entire movement, from Emerson’s *Self-Reliance*, first published in 1841, is a jab at regularity: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.”\(^{46}\) To the uninitiated, the least digestible aspect of the Transcendentalists is perhaps their love of unintuitive equations. The Americanist Robert DiYanni sums up Emerson’s famous essay “Nature” (1836) with two astronomically dense equations: “Man equals Nature equals God; Beauty equals Goodness equals Truth.”\(^ {47}\) A successful unpacking of either of these equations requires a discerning book or two, if not a bookcase full of them.

One especially difficult Transcendentalist equation is of particular importance to Ives and the discussion of home. The roots of the equation are located in the writings of Emerson, but it is more exact to say that they reflect Ives’s own strain of Emersonian Transcendentalism, presented in the *Essays Before a Sonata*. As Burkholder concisely explains in *Charles Ives: The Ideas Behind the Music*, the *Essays Before a Sonata* compound the contradictions of the Transcendentalists with a panoply of misreadings both willful and unintentional, outlandish quotations and references, and Ives’s often successful attempts at an Emersonian writing style. Burkholder boils down Ives’s thought to three philosophical foundations: self-reliance, personal and social idealism, and


dualism. When synthesized, these foundations result in the following Transcendentalist equation: the individual equals the collective, and the collective equals God.

The argument demands a deliberate, step-by-step walkthrough. The only way to live, Emerson and Ives would claim, is by rejecting external authority and following one’s own intuitions—in other words, practicing self-reliance (one of Ives’s three philosophical foundations). This self-reliance is inherently spiritual, due to what Transcendentalist historian and Emerson associate Octavius Brooks Frothingham called “the immanence of divinity in instinct,” which granted “supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of mankind.” Following personal intuition and instinct, then, led one to God. If all people follow their personal intuition, they become a collective of individuals, with God as the central conduit. The resulting equation exemplifies Ives’s other two philosophical foundations: the all-encompassing collective of individuals exhibits Ives’s personal and social idealism, while the paradoxical state of simultaneously being an individual and a member of a collective is a classic example of Ivesian dualism.

Ives’s philosophy is relevant to our purposes for two reasons. First, Ives saw great philosophy and great music as indistinguishable. In the passage below from the *Essays Before a Sonata*, Ives speaks about the opening motive of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony as if it were a philosophical statement comparable to the thoughts of the Transcendentalists:

> There is an “oracle” at the beginning of the Fifth Symphony; in those four notes lies one of Beethoven’s greatest messages. We would place its translation above the relentlessness of fate knocking at the door, above the

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48 Most of the ideas in this paragraph and the following paragraph stem from Burkholder, *Charles Ives: The Ideas Behind the Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 8-17.
49 Quoted in Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 4, 244.
50 Hertz, *Angels of Reality*, 93.
greater human message of destiny, and strive to bring it
towards the spiritual message of Emerson’s revelations—
even to the “common heart” of Concord—the soul of
humanity knocking at the door of the divine mysteries,
radiant in the faith that it will be opened—and the human
become the divine!\(^{51}\)

Later, Ives opens his essay on “Thoreau” with the statement: “Thoreau was a great
musician, not because he played the flute but because he did not have to go to Boston to
hear ‘the Symphony.’ The rhythm of his prose, were there nothing else, would determine
his value as a composer.”\(^{52}\) Ives’s play on the word “composer” in the double sense of
both musician and author is not a throwaway pun: it stands at the core of Ives’s belief in
the unity of philosophy, literature, and music.

More important for our topic, the Transcendentalist equation turns out to be a
felicitous model for the home. The ideal home is a place where we can be ourselves but
also exist as part of something larger, be it a family, a religious congregation, or any
other community. A home without individuality, community, or spirituality is deficient in
some way: without any individuality, the home becomes a dystopia; without any
community, the home becomes a set of unaffiliated individuals; and without God, the
home becomes meaningless (at least to the devoutly spiritual Transcendentalists). If “The
Alcotts” can really represent and conjoin individuality, community, and spirituality, it
may very well depict the perfect nineteenth-century home.

We do not need to look any further than the first two systems of the opening page
to find all three elements (see ex. 6).

\(^{51}\) Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata*, 36.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 51.
The first system, with its hymnlike texture and wholesome harmonies, projects Christian spirituality and likewise connotes a religious community, the image of a family singing hymns around a family piano. The melody is Ives’s conflation of three different tunes: the opening motive to Beethoven’s Fifth, Charles Zeuner’s *Missionary Chant*, and Simeon B. Marsh’s hymn *Martyn*, all of which begin with a note repeated three to four times before dropping a major third. Block helpfully lines up the three melodies in his study of the *Concord Sonata* (see fig. 3).
Although the three melodies heavily overlap, it is possible to hear all three in the first system, in the order Block lists them in figure 3. When the movement begins, Beethoven’s Fifth is the first tune that comes to mind, not only because it is the most famous motive in all of Western music but also because it has been quoted extensively in the sonata’s first two movements. The ornamental figure of four sixteenth notes midway through the system changes the tune we have in mind to Martyn; save for the first note, Ives’s sixteenth-note melody is identical to the alto part of measures 3-5 of Marsh’s hymn. Finally, over halfway through the system, as D is repeated four times instead of the expected three, the tune transforms into the pickup and first measure of Missionary Chant.
Ives’s conflation of three musically similar but geographically and culturally disparate melodies marks a serendipitous discovery. It suggests a sort of spiritual, transnational bond between European classical music and American hymn music. It is important to investigate the lyrics of the two hymns as well. H. Charles Zeuner’s *Missionary Chant* is about distance (“Ye Christian heralds, go proclaim / salvation through Emmanuel’s Name; / To distant climes the tidings bear / And plant the Rose of Sharon there.”), while Simeon Marsh’s *Martyn* is about loss (“Mary to her Savior’s tomb / Hasted at the early dawn; / Spice she brought and sweet perfume; / But the Lord she loved was gone.”). The former is resoundingly triumphant, the latter despairing. What they have in common is an emphasis on the strong interpersonal bonds we expect to find in a thriving home.

Sounds of individual voices come to the fore in the page’s polytonal second system. The right hand plays a melody (a rudimentary form of the “human faith melody”) in B-flat major, while the left hand repeats spacious A-flat minor triads as accompaniment. As Ives explains in the *Memos*, this moment represents a conversation between Bronson Alcott and the Alcotts’ neighbor Sam Staples, with Bronson in the left hand and Sam in the right:

> The left hand is in A-flat—in that key—no other key—keeps in that key—is that key—it intends, does, [is] meant to do that, couldn’t do anything else, and will always put the player’s left-hand-mind in that nice key of A-flat and nothing else (for old man Alcott likes to talk in A-flat and Sam Staples likes to have his say over the fence in B-flat).

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53 Ives, who had served as a church organist during and just following his time as an undergraduate, would likely have known the lyrical content of these hymns.
Both Ives’s nagging insistence that the left hand “is in A-flat—in that key—no other key” and the unaltering repetition of the A-flat major triad in the second system are likely Ives’s humorous representations of Bronson Alcott’s voice, with its “strong didactic streak” that made “the power of repetition…a natural means of illustration.”\(^5\) Ives also describes the “hypnotic mellifluous effect” of Alcott’s voice, which accounts for the left hand’s consonant and rhythmically consistent part. There is little mention of Sam Staples in the *Essays Before a Sonata*, so it is unclear whether and how the right-hand part represents his voice. If it is his voice, it is certainly less assured or commanding than Bronson’s: it flits about with irregular rhythms, inexplicable harmonies, and moderate leaps in register, all of which contrast with Bronson’s steady A-flat major triad.

In short, the first two systems of “The Alcotts” give us a taste of what we want to find in a home: individuality, community, and spirituality. But the best example of all three is Ives’s “human faith melody”: a patchwork of hymns, popular tunes, borrowings from Beethoven, and extensive self-quotations, all woven into one elongated lyrical melody. It perfectly embodies the Transcendentalist equation: its construction is the perfect musical representation of a collective composed of individuals, with its reliance on hymns supplying a distinctly spiritual element. To assemble the “human faith melody,” Ives uses *cumulative form*, which Burkholder describes as the trademark musical structure of Ives’s later career.

**Transcendental equations II: *Cumulative form***

In his staggeringly comprehensive survey of Ives’s musical borrowing, *All Made of Tunes*, Burkholder outlines fourteen categories of “procedures for using existing

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music”—a long-winded term that Burkholder chooses instead of the misleadingly specific term “quotation.” Among these fourteen procedures are well-worn compositional techniques that Ives inherited from the European tradition: variations on a borrowed tune, stretching out a tune into a cantus firmus, and combining two or more existing tunes into a medley. But some of the procedures are uniquely Ivesian innovations. What concerns us here may be the most Ivesian technique of all: cumulative form, also known as cumulative setting when a piece’s theme is mostly borrowed, as in “The Alcotts.” Burkholder summarizes this form as:

a thematic, non-repetitive form in which the principal theme is presented, not at the beginning as in traditional forms, but near the end, and is preceded, not followed, by its development. In cumulative form, there is no repetition of long segments of music, as there is in ternary, sonata, rondo, and many other forms, but rather a continual development that leads up to definitive statement of the theme. …In cumulative setting, the borrowed or paraphrased theme is first heard in fragments, often varied; is gradually assembled and clarified; and appears in full for the first time near the end of the movement.56

Before All Made of Tunes popularized the terms cumulative form and cumulative setting, the form described above was sometimes called “epiphany form.”57 In fact that older term does a better job of capturing the form’s process, how it accumulates motivic reagents until conditions are just right and a complete melody explodes forth. Critics have offered several philosophical explanations for this form, many of which draw on Transcendentalist thought.58 Wolfgang Rather points out that the form flips European sonata form on its head, moving from development to exposition instead of the other way

56 Burkholder, All Made of Tunes, 137-38.
57 Taruskin, Oxford History of Western Music, vol. 4, 261.
58 See Henry Cowell and Sidney Cowell, Charles Ives and His Music, 142, or Mellers, Music in a New Found Land, 45.
The result seems to be a uniquely American concoction: a melodic melting pot in which melodies of different nationalities, religions, and musical styles can cohere into one unified statement. In “The Alcotts,” the cumulative form of the “human faith melody” more specifically refers to the pedigree of the American home and the common sentiment that runs through it. Or it is even more than that: Burkholder has shown that the “human faith melody” crops up in all four movements of the Concord Sonata. He argues that “the ‘human faith melody’ becomes ‘the theme of Concord and its Transcendentalists’ through its inclusion in all four movements of the sonata.”

So which melodies make their way into the “human faith melody?” Block has divvied up the lengthy melody into seven distinct motivic fragments (see fig. 4).

![Figure 4: The “human faith melody,” as it appears in its full C-major presentation on the final page of “The Alcotts” (source: Block, Ives, Concord Sonata, 33)](image)

There is, unsurprisingly, the opening to Beethoven’s Fifth, which appears verbatim in the middle of the melody (x) and donates its short-short-short-long rhythm to the first four notes (t). Wherever Beethoven’s Fifth goes, Martyn and Missionary Chant cannot be far

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60 Burkholder, All Made of Tunes, 356.
61 Block, Ives, Concord Sonata, 32.
behind. The major-third drop of both hymns can be heard in motive $x$; the rhythm of *Missionary Chant* is discernable in $y$. Sharing $y$ with that American hymn is another Beethoven reference: the opening of the mammoth Piano Sonata in B-flat major, Op. 106, or “Hammerklavier” Sonata (1818). But there is more to this melody than Beethoven and American hymns. Near the end there is a bit of “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean,” an American secular patriotic song $(z)$. There are also at least two instances of self-quotation: $u$ parallels a motive found frequently in “Emerson” (see ex. 7), while $v$ takes a pentatonic variant on the atonal motive from the sonata’s beginning (sometimes called Ives’s “lyric motive”) and inverts it.

Example 7: The origins of motive $u$, the D-C-A pentatonic fall in the soprano voice (p. 14, system 2)

The motives woven into the “human faith melody” present an impressive heterogeneity that does justice to the diverse elements of the American home. There are self-quotations that highlight the individual, a patriotic song that emphasizes the collective, and hymn fragments that suggest spirituality. There are American tunes and European tunes crossing paths in the very same motives. There are symphonic strains, excerpts from piano pieces, and memorable portions of song. Amazingly, the result is not

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62 Ibid., 32-34.
a goofy quodlibet but the longest, most coherent melody of the entire sonata, with motives connecting seamlessly into something sweeping, lyrical, and, unlike the sounds of “Hawthorne,” compulsively hummable. Save for the E-flat major excursion in the middle of the movement, the melody’s triumphant C-major appearance at the close of “The Alcotts” is the sonata’s longest passage in an unblemished major key. Its full textures and massive chords suggest that the sound of the American home is more than the simplicity of an amateur piano piece: it is also the awesome might of a virtuosic tour de force (see ex. 8).

Example 8: The concluding statement of the “human faith melody” in its full glory (p. 57, systems 3-4)

Ives’s cumulative form is one of the great musical achievements of the Concord Sonata. Described in rarefied musical terminology, cumulative form seems tedious, dry, up to its neck in motivic nitty-gritty. The actual result, however, is musically memorable
and extramusically rich, one melody that can boast the associations of ten different tunes. That the most triumphant moment of the sonata had such humble origins—in bits and pieces of other tunes, some famous, some virtually unknown—might be Ives’s most important point about the American home. Taken bit by bit, its patchwork origins seem insubstantial; all together, it creates a sound that houses all of humankind.

Beethoven, by way of Massachusetts

At the time of the Concord Sonata’s publication, Beethoven had been dead for almost a century. Even that could not stop him from being one of the main characters of the Essays Before a Sonata. He appears first as a point of comparison, the European that sets the American sights of New England in relief. Besides claiming that Concord’s “human faith melody” was played with a “Beethovenlike sublimity,” Ives compares Beethoven to the Transcendentalists themselves. Emerson’s flashes of revelatory insight, for instance, “approach as near the divine as Beethoven in his most inspired moments.”64 Later, in an Emersonian sentence, Ives claims that “the inspiration of both Beethoven and Thoreau express profound truths and deep sentiment, but the intimate passion of it, the storm and stress of it, affected Beethoven in such a way that he could not but be ever showing it and Thoreau that he could not easily expose it.”65 These comparisons between Beethoven and the Transcendentalist authors come easily to Ives, who investigates Beethoven’s music with the close reading and care that one might apply to literature or philosophy, as in his explanation of the opening motive of the Fifth Symphony, “one of Beethoven’s greatest

64 Ives, Essays Before a Sonata, 30.
65 Ibid., 51.
messages.” The Transcendentalists, who held Beethoven’s symphonies and piano sonatas in high esteem, would have appreciated the comparisons. \(^{67}\) As historian Van Wyck Brooks explains, the European composer and the American philosophers often went hand in hand. “The interest in Beethoven seemed to flourish in minds that had been quickened by Emerson,” he wrote, noting that the zenith of high culture for many Bostonians was to attend “a Beethoven concert or an Emerson lecture.”\(^ {68}\)

Yet Ives’s highest compliment for Beethoven in the *Essays Before a Sonata* is tainted by heavy doubts on his future relevance:

> Music may be yet unborn. Perhaps no music has ever been written or heard. Perhaps the birth of art will take place at the moment, in which the last man, who is willing to make a living out of art is gone and gone forever. In the history of this youthful world the best product that human beings can boast of is probably Beethoven—but, maybe, even his art is as nothing in comparison with the future product of some coal-miner’s soul in the forty-first century.\(^ {69}\)

Passages such as this one show the multivalent role Beethoven played for Ives. He is an artist to aspire to, the “best product that human beings can boast of,” the composer whose music rivaled even the Transcendentalists in terms of philosophical depth. Block has observed that Beethoven is cited more than any other classical composer in Ives’s work. Ives’s First Symphony and the Second String Quartet quote Beethoven extensively, and Ives’s only transcription of a classical work was a setting of the second movement of Beethoven’s first piano sonata for string quartet.\(^ {70}\) At the same time, Beethoven was someone who needed to be transcended. In a famous passage from the *Memos*, Ives’s

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\(^{66}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{67}\) Geoffrey Block, “Ives and the ‘Sounds That Beethoven Didn’t Have’,” in *Charles Ives and the Classical Tradition*, 46.


\(^{69}\) Ibid., 88-89.

\(^{70}\) Block, “Ives and the ‘Sounds That Beethoven Didn’t Have’,” 37.
review of a recent Beethoven recital, Ives remembers “feeling toward Beethoven that he’s a great man—but Oh for just one big strong chord not tied to any key.” A modern composer, in Ives’s view, wields and should employ “sounds that Beethoven didn’t have.” The review abruptly transitions into Ives’s description of a minor-ninth-laden stretch from one of his own piano pieces, presumably exemplifying one such sound “that Beethoven didn’t have.”

In “The Alcotts,” Ives attempted to transcend Beethoven by confusing his famous motive with two selections from American hymnody, and by weaving it into the musical tapestry of the “human faith motive.” Ives thus suggested that the American home has mixed DNA: it is equal parts plain American song and ponderous European symphony. The textures and tonal structure of “The Alcotts,” however, suggest otherwise. Critics have pointed out that the movement’s references to Beethoven always hew closely to Beethoven’s original textures. All four movements of the Concord Sonata quote the opening to Beethoven’s Fifth, but “The Alcotts” is the only one of the four to present the motive in Beethoven’s key of C minor and with a call-and-response texture vaguely reminiscent of Beethoven’s original. The direct quote is fleeting, but unmistakable (see ex. 9).

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71 Ives, Memos, 44.
Example 9: The opening motive of Beethoven's Fifth is finally heard in its original key and call-and-response texture (p. 54, system 1)

A similar faithfulness marks Ives’s quotes of Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata. As Block points out, the first appearance assumes Beethoven’s original key, B-flat major, while the final appearance “strongly resembles Beethoven’s piano texture” (see ex. 10).  

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72 Block, Ives, Concord Sonata, 54.
Even though Ives is willing to toy with Beethoven’s material, he is reticent to leave Beethoven’s keys and textures behind. If the home of “The Alcotts” really has mixed DNA, the heritage seems to be more European than American, looking backward to Old World antecedents instead of looking forward to New World possibilities.

The fidelity to Beethoven’s legacy is even clearer when the movement is considered as a whole. Even though the initial key signature of the movement is B-flat major, many claim that the beginning sounds like C minor, noting both the prevalence of C-minor triads in the first system of the movement and the combination of A-flat and B-flat major triads in the second system, which suggests either E-flat major or C minor (see ex. 6). The movement ends, however, with the “human faith melody” and the “Hammerklavier” reference played in C major. Ives summarizes the harmonic trajectory of “The Alcotts”—from B-flat major/C minor to C major—in a mixolydian-sounding cadence at the movement’s end (see ex. 11).

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73 Henry Cowell and Sidney Cowell, Charles Ives and His Music, 197-98.
None of the critics who argue that the movement starts in C minor and ends in C major have taken the natural next step of the reasoning and traced the harmonic trajectory of “The Alcotts” to Beethoven’s Fifth, which famously begins in C minor and ends with twenty-nine bars of C-major triads, blared at a victorious fortissimo. Although Ives’s quotations of the Fifth Symphony’s famous motives and textures are more noticeable, Ives’s appropriation of the harmonic framework of Beethoven’s entire symphony has a vaster scope. It is the greatest homage Ives could have paid to Beethoven, save for his decision to use the piano sonata, a genre forever associated with Beethoven. This is arguably the one blemish on Ives’s musical depiction of an American home: its dedication to Europe. Although “The Alcotts” employs American song and presents an American heterogeneity in its cumulative form, it exists entirely within a European framework and obeys its European antecedent with a fidelity bordering on subservience.

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74 Two other prominent keys in Beethoven’s symphony, E-flat major (the key of the secondary theme of the first movement) and A-flat major (the key of the second movement), feature heavily on the first page of “The Alcotts.”
Once, in response to the claim that his sonata lacked form or design, Ives wrote the following memo:

A natural procedure in a piece of music, be it a song or a week’s symphony, may have something in common [with]—I won’t say analogous—to a walk up a mountain. There’s the mountain, its foot, its summit—there’s the valley—the climber looks, turns, and looks down or up. He sees the valley, but not at exactly the same angle he saw it at [in] the last look—and the summit is changing with every step—and the sky. Even if he stands on the same rock at the top and looks at Heaven and Earth, he is not in just the same key he started in, or in the same moment of existence.

(That a symphony, sonata, or jig, that all nice music should end where it started, on the Doh key, is no more a natural law than that all men should die in the same town and street number in which they were born.)

“The Alcotts” takes us on a journey, across cultures, genres, keys, eras, textures, and tunes. True to Ives’s intentions, it does not “end where it started.” It starts in the Alcotts’ New England; it ends in Beethoven’s Germany.

**Conclusion: To the twentieth century**

The critical outrage that met the publication of *Concord Sonata* in 1920 is matched in intensity only by the critical enthusiasm that met John Kirkpatrick’s premiere of the sonata on 20 January 1939. The reception did not change overnight—it had to wait until the next morning, when Lawrence Gilman, the head music reviewer of the *New York Herald Tribune* and a notorious modern-music maven, published a dithyramb of a

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The sonata is exceptionally great music—it is, indeed, the greatest music composed by an American, and the most deeply and essentially American in impulse and implication. It is wide-ranging and capacious. It has passion, tenderness, humor, simplicity, homeliness. It has imaginative and spiritual vastness. It has wisdom and beauty and profundity, and a sense of the encompassing terror and splendor of human life and human destiny—a sense of those mysteries that are both human and divine.\(^76\)

From that moment on, Ives would be known as the visionary, roguish American who beat the Europeans to atonality. Few reviews at the time recognized Ives’s debts to the European tradition and to Beethoven in particular. If they did, they might have mentioned the other piece on Kirkpatrick’s program: Beethoven’s Piano Sonata no. 21 in C major, Op. 53, the epic “Waldstein” (1804).

Recently, the Americanist myth surrounding Ives has begun to deflate. Taruskin’s assertion—that “Ives’s esthetic outlook is far better understood when its connection with the European—and particularly the German—past is acknowledged”—is beginning to gain traction.\(^77\) Block and Burkholder’s book-length study Charles Ives and the Classical Tradition convincingly traces Ives’s techniques to the canonical European composers of the Classical and Romantic eras and even some of Ives’s contemporaries.

One way to reconcile these European influences with Ives’s project of depicting an American home is to note that the movement is a twentieth-century composition about a nineteenth-century home. This is the primary distinction between Ives’s depiction of the

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\(^77\) Taruskin, Oxford History of Western Music, vol. 4, 265.
home and the twentieth-century homes of Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, and Leonard Bernstein. Ives’s sonata, envisaged and completed before the First World War, hearkens back to a time in American history when the European roots of America’s history, philosophy, and artistic life were undeniable, even celebrated.

It is crucial to discriminate Ives’s sense of imagination from the nostalgia that emerges in the next three compositions I discuss, most prominently in Barber’s *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*, but also in Copland’s music for *Our Town* and Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti*. Both Ives and Barber turn to American literature in their depictions of the home—Ives to the Transcendentalists, Barber to poet and novelist James Agee—but Barber chooses a text that corresponds almost exactly to his own life, while Ives writes about a home that was several decades out of his reach. The drive of “The Alcotts” cannot truly be called nostalgia, because Ives never experienced firsthand the past he depicts in the *Concord Sonata*. As Magee writes, the *Concord Sonata* “celebrated and enshrined a lifetime of otherwise unknowable memories.”

To borrow a trite phrase, Ives, the supposed forefather of modernism in American music, lived in the past. But it was never quite his own.

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78 Magee, *Charles Ives Reconsidered*, 137.
Chapter Two: Sounds of Utopia: Aaron Copland’s “Story of Our Town”

Sam Wood’s 1940 film *Our Town*, an adaptation of Thornton Wilder’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning stage play, documents two of the most flawless American homes ever put to celluloid. That flawlessness is unavoidably present in the film’s very first scene, which transpires early one pleasant morning in the fictionalized idyll of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire. First, we see two adjacent, nearly identical houses, which bear the visual hallmarks of quaint turn-of-the-century New England living: white picket fences, primly pleated curtains, and tasteful arrangements of sunflowers and heliotrope (see fig. 1).

Inside these houses we observe two families—the Gibbes in the first house, the Webbs in the second—eating full breakfasts with just-delivered milk and fresh eggs. They are the kind of families found only in films, sitcoms, and novels: both the Gibbes and the Webbs boast an equal number of sons and daughters, a perfect diversity of personalities, and an abnormal degree of attractiveness and charm. Each family comprises a financially successful and universally respected father, a mother full of stern but selfless wisdom, and a son-and-daughter duo with impeccable silver-screen comic timing. The two standouts of the families are the film’s young protagonists, George Gibbs and Emily Webb, played by the (then) up-and-coming actors William Holden and Martha Scott. Their Golden-Age Hollywood glamour possesses a certain magnetic pull on the camera; in some scenes, they command the center of each and every shot. According to the commandments of early Hollywood, the two most beautiful people in the film have to fall madly in love. Naturally, George and Emily marry midway through the film, founding a new home that is just as flawless as the two houses we see in this opening scene.
But the visuals and narratives in themselves do not assure a perfect American home—think of the countless television commercials that feature picture-perfect and thus utterly unrealistic families. What elevates these homes to a semblance of un tarnished perfection is the film’s score, the second major film project of Aaron Copland. “Story of Our Town,” the musical cue that Copland employs in the film’s domestic scenes, this breakfast scene included, is simple, frugal music, which nevertheless avoids one-word encapsulation. Its limited harmonic and rhythmic vocabulary manages to spark a wide array of associations, recalling church organs, choral hymns, horn fanfares, even catchy popular tunes you whistle while you work. Its most notable sonorities are the orchestra-
wide major triads that traverse the lowest lows of the basses to the highest highs of the woodwinds. The result is pure consonance, isolated, epitomized, and maximalized, an all-encompassing affirmation of simple rural living.

If any description suits the town of Grover’s Corners, it is the old cliché, “too good to be true.” The phrase makes literal sense: the town, though inspired by the MacDowell Colony in the town of Peterborough, New Hampshire, is largely the product of Wilder’s imagination. But even as a narrative, filmic, and musical representation of an American home, Grover’s Corners is simply too good. Filmgoers glean early on in the film that breakfast-time in Grover’s Corners is this flawless, day after day. Even by the end of the film, when George and Emily’s parents have passed away and a completely different generation is running the town, the scene looks exactly the same: we find the same houses are still standing in place, and the same music, Copland’s “Story of Our Town,” is heard in exactly the same form, without any modulation or alteration. These perfections can be startlingly eerie. Take the strange symmetries between the two households in the opening scene. Cross-cutting between the Gibbes’ and the Webbs’ kitchens in a rapid montage, Wood demonstrates how the two families operate on identical schedules: they dress at the same exact time, cook at the same exact time, and eat at the same exact time. The children even leave for school at the same time, nearly colliding in the yard between their houses as Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb bellow complaints in their wake. Through deliberate symmetry in framing and blocking, Wood suggests that these two perfect families are uncannily identical (see fig. 2).
The home of *Our Town* is best termed a utopia. A place of perfect social, political, and legal harmony, the utopia was first described by English philosopher Sir Thomas More in his political allegory *Utopia* (1516), which he titled with a word of his own invention, an assemblage of Greek and Latin roots that translates to “no place” or “nowhere.” The name says it all: utopia’s unattainable ideals imply that it can be found in no place, that it can exist nowhere. Thus the “too good to be true” utopia of Grover’s Corners fails to represent any realistic American home, with all its imperfections and faults.
Perhaps one mark of a successful film composer is that his music translates perfectly the message of his assigned film into the medium of music. If so, then Copland’s “Story of Our Town” is a success: it sonically depicts the film’s utopia through allusion, a radical approach to harmony, and a self-conscious simplicity of style; it avoids difficulty, dissonance, and development, insisting on unceasing consonance and comfortable rhythms. But, as in the film, the utopia represented in Copland’s music strikes us as lacking. At the time of Our Town, this simple style was relatively new for Copland. His earlier works reveled in modernist musical techniques such as violent syncopations, atonality, and the merciless eradication of the triadic harmonies used so prominently in Our Town. To better understand Copland’s stylistic turnaround and the complex symbolism of his simple style, we will take the jarring jump from the purity of Grover’s Corners to the glitter of Hollywood, from a fictionalized utopia to America’s most glamorous dystopia.

“Hearing place” and surviving Hollywood

Copland’s populist music almost has a synesthetetic quality to it. When you listen to a composition like his Wild West ballet, Billy the Kid (1938), you also paradoxically see it: the vast expanse of the Western frontier and the personal and economic possibilities it affords. Many believe that Copland’s chief contribution to American classical music was developing a uniquely American sense of place in music, what Copland’s biographer Howard Pollack calls “a model for authentic depictions of the American scene in general—city and country, past and present.”¹ Copland first explored these connotations

of physical and visual space in his ballets, but he was always on the lookout for new media that could house his idealized representations of American life. If there was any medium that could indelibly combine sound, image, and narrative into one unified artwork, it was film.

When Copland travelled to Hollywood to score his first big-budget project, *Of Mice and Men* (1939), he stepped into a Wild West that bore no resemblance to the mythic frontier of *Billy the Kid*. In place of roguish outlaws were the new Western villains: dictatorial film producers with minds fixated on high revenues, low budgets, and short deadlines. Instead of rollicking rodeos, film composers had to learn a delicate dance with tone-deaf sound editors and inflexible unions. In this environment, the open prairie so vividly evoked in Copland’s ballets had been tamed, populated, and industrialized.

“Hollywood is an extraordinary place,” Copland reported to his friend, the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, “like nothing else in the world.”

It certainly was nothing like the New York that Copland had called home, where the music scene was the negative image of the Hollywood pictures of the 1930s: tiny audience, little revenue, and limited mass appeal.

Why Copland traveled to Hollywood to score mainstream films six times over the decade is still a subject of debate. It is not even clear how Copland felt about Hollywood: in print, interviews, and lectures, Copland addressed the film industry in equivocating terms, his attitudes including everything from unmitigated contempt to reserved admiration to geeky fascination with the medium’s technical ins-and-outs. On one hand, the leftist in Copland was repulsed by Hollywood’s profit-oriented tactics and narrow-

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minded taste, agreeing with his friend and fellow composer George Antheil that the Hollywood music industry was “a closed corporation.” On the other hand, the modernist composer in Copland found the new medium of film and the process of sound editing endlessly intriguing: his accounts of superimposing the recordings of two separate orchestras sound like recipes for *musique concrète* compositions. The contemporary composer in Copland saw potential in Hollywood’s demand for living composers and its never-ending supply of “copyists, instrumentalists, and conductors who do nothing but copy, perform, and conduct the music of contemporary composers.” “Theoretically, at any rate,” he claimed, “the town is a composer’s Eldorado.” In fact, fast-paced production schedules required composers to write hour-long scores in three to four weeks. While Copland had it better than most—he was given six weeks for his first score—the quickened pace is comically brief compared to the three years Copland spent fine-tuning his upcoming *Piano Sonata* (1941). The only sentiment common to all of Copland’s different opinions is a hatred of Hollywood sound editors, who all too often disobeyed Copland’s dynamics and lowered his scores to the point of inaudibility to make way for dialogue. Copland sought his revenge in print whenever possible: “Surely only a musician can be sensitive to the subtle effects of musical sound, particularly when mixed with other sounds. A Toscanini would be none too good for such a job—certainly a sound expert is not qualified.”

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3 Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 337.  
6 Ibid., 115-16.
The most common explanation for Copland’s trip to Hollywood is that he was drawn like a moth to the bright Hollywood spotlights. Pollock claims that Copland’s chief motivations in 1939 were desires for higher pay and a greater audience.\textsuperscript{7} Copland, not one to worry about selling out, would have agreed with this assessment. In the years before \textit{Billy the Kid}, Copland struggled to find an audience, composing unwelcoming, dissonance-laden pieces for the “all-too-familiar small group” that frequented his concerts. In the press he was known as the “wild-eyed modernist,” the “\textit{enfant terrible},” the artist whose concerts were avoided by the “hundreds of thousands.”\textsuperscript{8} Copland, dismayed at his lack of popular or financial success, had been for several years considering a shift towards a populist style, which meant shrugging off the heavy European influences of his beloved Shostakovich, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky in favor of a distinctly American style. Musicologists like Neil Lerner argue that the allure of working in the film industry—at the time America’s most powerful, profitable media industry—was the primary motivating factor in Copland’s shift to populism.\textsuperscript{9} Copland himself said nothing to confirm or deny this, but imagine how the “wild-eyed modernist” must have felt in 1938 while reading the first of George Antheil’s columns devoted entirely to film music in \textit{Modern Music}, “On the Hollywood Front.” The colossal audiences described must have pacified the so-called \textit{enfant terrible}:

\begin{quote}
American composers may regard the sound track of the motion picture as a crass medium for the propagation of their musical thoughts. Nevertheless they should remember—especially in this day when the hue and cry is for new audiences—that 90,000,000 persons a week hear movie music in America alone, and over 500,000,000
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Pollack, \textit{Aaron Copland}, 337.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Copland and Perlis, \textit{Copland: 1900 Through 1942}, 244.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Neil Lerner, “Copland’s Music of Wide Open Spaces: Surveying the Pastoral Trope in Hollywood,” \textit{Musical Quarterly} 85, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 477-78.
\end{itemize}
persons a week hear various Hollywood scores throughout the world…. No one interested in wider publics, the education of the people, or the general emotional vibrations of the times, can leave motion pictures out of his calculations.\(^\text{10}\)

Whatever Copland’s motivations, Hollywood was an incomparable boon to his career. By 1940, after only three months of work in Hollywood, he had netted himself four Oscar nominations, top billing on several major films, and an open invitation back to Hollywood that amounted to a guaranteed spout of revenue and renown. By the time he had finished *Our Town*, he was a regular character on the gossip column of the *New York Times*, the sole classical composer keeping the company of household names like Clark Gable and Charlie Chaplin.\(^\text{11}\) Against impossible odds, a supremely marginalized figure of American society—a Jewish, homosexual, near-socialist New Yorker—had founded a distinctly American style that Virgil Thompson deemed “the most distinguished populist music style yet created in America.”\(^\text{12}\) Copland’s mainstream film work soon led to a commission from the United States government on the World-War-II-era propaganda film, *The Cummington Story* (1945). It was official: the wild-eyed modernist had become America’s official composer.

Copland’s chief success as a film composer was inventing an alternative to the European nineteenth-century symphonic style so prevalent in Hollywood film scores, which he decried as a “a style now so generally accepted as to be considered inevitable.”\(^\text{13}\) The overflowing sentiments and sublime summits of Romantic music have always been favorite tools of Hollywood film composers; they are immediate emotional

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\(^\text{12}\) Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 343.  
shortcuts, informing audiences how to feel whenever a scene’s tone is the least bit opaque. For a time, the Romantic idiom was so commonplace in American film that deceased European composers found name recognition in Hollywood circles. When the film composer Dmitri Tiomkin gave his acceptance speech at the 1955 Oscars for the score of *The High and the Mighty*, the first people he thanked were “Johannes Brahms, Johann Strauss, Richard Strauss, Richard Wagner….”14 What the audience mistook for a joke were sincere acknowledgements: Tiomkin was simply thanking his and Hollywood’s greatest musical influences.

Copland believed that it was his duty to combat the style’s overuse—or at least to complain about it as much as possible. “And why, oh why, the nineteenth century?” he whines in the middle of an otherwise scholarly article in *Modern Music*.15 In another article in the *New York Times*, Copland pointed out one instance of blatant illogic caused by a clash of styles:

> The other day I saw a picture that had as its setting medieval Europe. There was one scene in a cathedral, and the accompanying music was a most authentic fifteenth century motet. But the next shot was of the heroine, and the score immediately shifted to a reflection of the sweetest of Strauss waltzes, thus projecting the audience four centuries forward in as many seconds.16

As emotional and immediate as the sonorities of European Romanticism may be, they struck Copland as out of time and out of place. Inspired by recent film soundtracks by Americans such as Virgil Thompson and Roy Harris that rejected European influences,

Copland decided to invent a modern American style more suitable for modern American stories.\textsuperscript{17}

The resulting style is known by various names: Copland’s populist style, his Americana style, or “The Open Prairie” (named after the first section of \textit{Billy the Kid}).\textsuperscript{18} Copland, for his part, called it his “simpler style,” which he maintained was as serious and modern as his earlier “severe” style. Copland would be forced to explain and elucidate these two labels, “simple” versus “severe,” for the rest of his career. He was essentially depicted in print as a split personality, with “the austere, intellectual modernist on one side” and “the accessible, popular composer on the other.”\textsuperscript{19} Despite all the controversy it provoked, “simpler style” is possibly the most accurate term for Copland’s populist idiom. What makes it so “simple” are its unadorned major triads, melodies that recall folksongs and hymns, and its easygoing rhythms and tempi. Both Copland and his critics approvingly described these elements as “homespun.”\textsuperscript{20} Like the hymns, popular songs, and Scotch tunes woven into the “The Alcotts,” these musical elements are codes for the home, projections of comfort, stability, and humility.

Besides its simple, homespun qualities, the style has at its core the idea of openness. Musically, this openness translates to wide, affectless intervals such as fourths, fifths, and sevenths, present in both melody and harmony; spare orchestrations coupled with vast silences; and register-, orchestra-spanning chords that convey enormousness and unity. The critical consensus is that this music is the perfect counterpoint for film’s image and narrative: its economic instrumentation and narrow conception of harmony do

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Sally Bick, “‘Of Mice and Men’: Copland, Hollywood, and American Musical Modernism,” \textit{American Music} 23, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 433-34.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Alex Ross, \textit{The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century} (New York: Picador, 2007), 300.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Copland and Perlis, \textit{Copland: 1900 Through 1942}, 247-51.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Bick, “Of Mice and Men,” 430-32.
\end{itemize}
not steal the attention from the screen, but complement the action. Wilfred Mellers points out that the music’s sparse, lucid texture “is by nature suitable to the microphone and to mechanistic treatment generally”; Copland’s was a style readymade for the emerging media of radio and film. Symbolically, Copland’s openness took on a range of meanings. Besides the Wild West of *Billy the Kid*, Mellers interprets this musical openness as America’s original promise of a capacious “new world.” In his essay “Copland’s Music of Wide Open Spaces,” Neil Lerner perceives the openness as “the limitless possibilities of the so-called American Dream.”

On first glance, a music that so privileges openness seems to be an odd accompaniment for *Our Town*. *Our Town* examines—and is confined to—Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire, a village so miniscule that it can fit in a film frame with plenty of room to spare (see fig. 3). What type of environment could combine the freedom connotated by Copland’s “Open Prairie” sound with the narrowly demarcated space of a village? Does such a contradictory place even exist; if so, what might we call it? The answer might lie in Caryl Flinn’s *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music*, a study of Hollywood film music in the 1930s and 1940s. In the scores of that classic period, she discerns “an emerging sense of utopia, an ideal organized around the notion that collective identity—be it national, political, or cultural—could somehow be materialized through music.” According to Flinn, composers could signal this utopia in one of two ways, “by expelling foreign influences…or by paring down the formal

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21 This view has been recently expressed in Bick, “‘Of Mice and Men,’” 435.
23 Ibid., 375.
25 All quotes in this paragraph from Flinn, *Strains of Utopia*, 22.
complexity of a work.” Her definition of musical utopia lines up exactly with Copland’s self-conscious “simpler style” and his deliberate rejection of the involved modernism of Russian, French, and German influences in favor of a purely American idiom.

Figure 3: The fenced-off (or fenced-in) town of Grover’s Corners domesticates the open frontier within the confines of a village

Copland’s decision to depict the small village of Grover’s Corners using the open sonorities of his “simpler style” does not result in a contradiction at all. By choosing this style, Copland attempts to depict the American home as a utopia: an idealized, timeless, unblemished place, a place that miraculously domesticates the open frontier within the confines of a village.
Our Town, the play

*Our Town* the film hews closely to *Our Town* the play, one of the definitive theatrical depictions of the American home in the twentieth century. When Thornton Wilder’s play first premiered in 1938, there was no shortage of critics willing to shower both the author and his play with acclaim, applause, and awards. Yet few critics made the play sound like a Pulitzer-Prize-worthy, audience-grabbing smash—let alone a compelling piece of theater. Imagine a contemporary theatergoer flipping through the Arts section of the *New York Times*, spotting a play summarized as “chiefly the story of a boy and girl, children of neighboring parents, who fall in love, get married and have a child.”26 Who would pay good money to see a quotidian story that occurs in towns all over America? Even in recent years, *Our Town* has bemused and divided critics. On one extreme is a haughty critic who admires the play but admits that its characters and setting are not “very progressive or cultured or enlightened or very interesting.”27 On the other extreme is the fawning critic who claims that Wilder’s subject “is human life itself; the universal forces acting upon it are Time, Nature, and Death; the forces acting from within it are Instinct, Love, Despair, and Apathy.”28 Both assessments are valid, even compatible: *Our Town* stands somewhere between total banality and stunning profundity.

The plot of *Our Town*—if plot is even the right word for something so understated—concerns a generation in the life of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire at the turn of the century. While the play has a certain fascination with day-to-day activity—at the opening of every act, we see a paperboy making the rounds, men en route to work, ladies gossiping while performing chores—the play focuses on the fates of two

families who have lived in Grover’s Corners for centuries, the Gibbes and Webbs. The representatives of the two families are the eldest children, George Gibbs and Emily Webb, who start a romance at the beginning of the play, marry around the middle, and, with Emily’s death in childbirth, encounter their mortality at the play’s close. Instead of covering the story of George and Emily with a traditional dramatic arc—rising action followed by climax followed by falling action—the play comprises three self-contained, unconnected acts that function as tableaux: “Daily Life,” “Love and Marriage,” and “Death and Eternity.”

*Our Town* is an unusual play not only because of its unsensational plot and its penchant for everyday minutia, but also because of the presence of its peculiar narrator, the Stage Manager. At first, the Stage Manager appears to be the audience’s ambassador into the fictional world of Grover’s Corners, introducing characters and scenes while interspersing his own philosophizing commentary. Before long he addresses both audience members and fictional characters, often blurring the distinction between the two. As Lerner puts it, the Stage Manager erases “any traces of class difference,” just as the utopia of Grover’s Corners lacks any noticeable class division.29 Early on in Act I, he almost erases the gap between audience and fictional character completely, asking the audience if they have any questions for the characters currently on the stage. Various actors planted in the audience reply, conducting scripted conversations with the Stage Manager and the on-stage characters. At the time this was a novel metatheatrical technique, one that somehow familiarizes audiences with the play’s characters while acknowledging the fundamental difference between fact and fiction. The Stage Manager is also something of a theater director, moving around and designating the play’s few

objects of scenery: tables, planks, and chairs. He stands supernaturally out of time, freely discussing past and future generations, constructing his own time-insensitive language by seamlessly bridging past, present, and future tenses.

More than any other character in Our Town, the Stage Manager exemplifies the play’s mix of banality and profundity. Many of his lines sound simultaneously folksy and deep, such as: “It’s like one of those European fellas said: every child born into the world is nature’s attempt to make a perfect human being.” But the Stage Manager is not the only philosopher in this small town: one of Wilder’s main achievements in Our Town is making ordinary characters sound insightful and heroic without making them sound implausible. One of the best examples is a conversation between George Gibbs and his eleven-year-old sister Rebecca at the close of the play’s first act. Rebecca chitchats about her friend, Jane Crofut:

REBECCA: I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; the Crofut Farm; Grover’s Corner; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

GEORGE: What’s so funny about that?

REBECCA: But listen, it’s not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that’s what it said on the envelope.

GEORGE: What do you know!

REBECCA: And the postman brought it just the same.

GEORGE: What do you know!31

31 Ibid., 173.
In *Our Town*, a scene this humorous and imaginative can still feel true to life. There is something authentically childlike about both sides in this conversation. George and Rebecca Gibbs are not fascinated by “the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God,” only by the fact that, despite the unconventional address, “the postman brought it just the same.” The reaction, equal parts naiveté and pure fascination with everyday affairs, is as conceivable at the turn of the century as it is today.

In these intersections of the ordinary and the profound, *Our Town* finds a moral. In each scene, Wilder takes an unassuming moment—like two kids talking about a goofy letter, for example—and suggests that these ordinary moments can also be poignant and meaningful. His goal is to dramatize what one critic called “the essentially ordinary, uncomplicated, yet terrifying battle to realize fully our own ordinary existences.”

The late climax in Act III, subtitled “Death and Eternity,” although strangely supernatural at first, is both the most ordinary and poignant moment in the play. Emily, about to die from a fever, revisits her twelfth birthday in a hallucination. The adult Emily observes how the twelve-year-old Emily is completely oblivious to the love of her family and the young doting George, but she is unable to change the past. In a moment that combines the celebration of a birthday and the deprivation of a funeral, Emily realizes with sorrow that her past—comprising not only her family members, her friends, and her childhood, but also ordinary sights like “Mama’s sunflowers,” “food and coffee,” “new-ironed dresses and hot baths”—was irretrievably gone. “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?” Emily asks in the play’s closing lines, and for a minute the play threatens to teeter into treacly sentimentality. Before emotions rise too high, the Stage Manager enters the scene, answering her philosophical question with an

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everyday reply: “No. (Pause.) The saints and poets maybe—they do some.”

Wilder, described once as “hardly a romantic,” wants ordinary people to recognize the value of their lives in the present—but he knows that this is not the manner of ordinary people.

*Our Town* is an instructive depiction of the home, due to its microscopic attention to the minutiae of daily life, its use of the Stage Manager to emphasize the timeless nature of the home, and its conflation of the ordinary and the profound. But at heart the setting of Grover’s Corners is a utopia, one completely governed and comprehended by the Stage Manager, a godlike figure who can walk the audience through the home and elucidate all its ins and outs. Everything in Grover’s Corners is in order, which makes for a neatly organized play with a clear moral—but a one-sided depiction of the American home.

**Sounds of utopia: “Story of Our Town”**

For all its emphasis on the town of Grover’s Corners, *Our Town* is not really about a specific town in New England. Wilder’s deliberate title does not pinpoint any particular time or place; it could refer to any town, at any time; it could even refer to utopia, “no place.” This vagueness was central to the film adaptation of *Our Town* and its creative team—the playwright-turned-screenwriter Thornton Wilder, the producer Sol Lesser, and Copland—who all wanted to produce a film with broad, lasting appeal, unconfined to any particular generation or region. The prospect of a widely relatable and profitable film must have allured the budding populist in Copland. In his autobiography, Copland explains his efforts to compose accessible music for the film, and to avoid writing a location-specific score that would interfere with the story’s “eternal, universal qualities.”

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Although he was famous for quoting existing songs as themes, Copland limited direct quotes to hymns or folksongs in *Our Town*, fearing that allusions “would have pinned the period down too specifically.”\(^{34}\) Omitting piano and percussion, Copland used a reduced orchestra of strings, brass, woodwinds, and harp. The prominent roles given to flutes, French horns, and harp give the entirety of the score a pastoral flavor—an essential quality of this utopia, it seems, is its intimate communion with nature.

Surprisingly, we do not hear too much of Copland’s actual score, which critics have variously described as “unobtrusive”\(^ {35}\) and “a masterpiece of understatement.”\(^ {36}\) Save for a few prominent cues, we mostly hear the quintessential sounds of New England life. In Act I, “Daily Life,” these sounds include the clattering percussion of tin milk containers and the *piano* clucking of chickens. By the film’s close, the clamor of the first automobiles dominates, drowning out conversations and natural sounds alike. In between, when George and Emily wed at the end of the film’s second act, the church organist accompanies their entrance with Wagner’s *Bridal Chorus* and their exit with Mendelssohn’s *Wedding March*. What would an American wedding be without those two European mainstays?

For long stretches of the film, Copland’s score plays second fiddle to the diegetic sounds of Grover’s Corners. This is due in part to Copland’s views on scoring films. “Personally I like to make use of music’s power sparingly, saving it for absolutely essential points,” he claimed in one of his several film-scoring manifestos. “A composer knows how to play with silences; he knows that to take music out can at times be more

\(^{34}\) Copland and Perlis, *Copland: 1900 Through 1942*, 303.
\(^{36}\) Pollack, *Aaron Copland*, 345.
effective than any use of it might be.” Moreover, *Our Town’s* focus on everyday situations, its modest characters, and its plotlessness—by Copland’s appellation, the film was not a normal Hollywood film but a “quasi-documentary”—would have conflicted with a constantly active score. Alex Ross, describing Copland’s score for *Of Mice and Men*, might as well have been describing Copland’s tack in *Our Town*: “What’s distinctive about the score is its reticence; its commentaries tend to be subtle rather than obvious, and for long stretches it stays silent. It’s as if the composer were watching the drama along with the audience.”

The utopian spirit of *Our Town* is encapsulated in the film’s most salient cue, “Story of Our Town,” which Copland called the “theme song” for the film. “Story of Our Town” acts as a leitmotif of the town itself, playing under the three montages of daily life that open the film’s three acts, during Emily’s hallucinatory return to the town, and over the final credits. The cue accompanies the same images again and again: parallel rows of houses in front of an evergreen New England forest, the paperboy making his rounds, and children preparing for school. These typical images of home life never drastically change; similarly, the simple sounds of the “Story of Our Town” never develop or are transposed over the course of the film. Copland’s theme song for the town is static, omnipresent, and insensible to time. As a leitmotif, then, the cue signifies utopian timelessness and order of the small village.

“Story of Our Town” exhibits all of the sounds of utopia—that is, the key harmonic features of Copland’s “simpler” idiom. Its fundamental building block is the

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37 Copland, “Tip to Moviegoers,” 106.
39 Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 318.
major triad. The majority of the sonorities are unembellished major triads or polychords constructed from major triads; minor chords play minor roles. These are the same expansive major chords as those heard in “The Open Prairie” from *Billy the Kid*: their fifths, sixths, and octaves suggest the openness of the unmapped American landscape, an openness that Copland distills into the small town of Grover’s Corners. The unadorned simplicity of the chords suggests a certain purity—an elemental purity of the harmonic series that connotes the unaffected purity of the town and its inhabitants. Thanks to Copland’s comfortable tempo marking, “Moderate, with calm,” the chords are given time to settle in. In the film, the cue is always associated with the omniscient Stage Manager, so the easygoing *andante* provides an apt accompaniment for our narrator as he literally walks us around the town and figuratively walks us through his town’s history and demographics. Rhythmically, the cue takes the form of an orchestra-wide chorale, with instruments rarely staggering entrances or sitting out. This homophony is the perfect musical analogue for Flinn’s definition of utopia as a “collective identity”: Copland’s collegial instruments always work in tandem, behaving like the orchestra’s equally valued citizens.

Over this overwhelmingly consonant background, Copland writes a folksy four-note melody based entirely on a major triad: flutes and violins leap a perfect fifth up from the tonic and follow an arpeggio back down (see ex. 1).
Example 1: The arpeggio-based melody of “Story of Our Town” (Our Town Suite, m. 1-5)⁴¹

Copland’s favorite trick in “Story of Our Town” is to superimpose this melody over plagal cadences (IV to I), also known as “Amen” cadences due to their common

⁴¹ Examples are taken from Aaron Copland, Our Town: Music From the Film Score (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1945). The complete score for Our Town has never been published. Copland arranged three of the cues into an orchestral suite, also titled Our Town; it begins and ends with “Story of Our Town.”
occurrence at the close of hymns. The religious overtones of these “Amen” cadences suit the locale—Protestant New England—while the continual returns to the tonic provide a comforting stability. Even Copland’s more unlikely pairings of major triads, such as the third relations of G major over E-flat major and F major over A major in measure 5, do not produce jarring dissonances, since Copland strategically places one triad in the strings and another in the horns and woodwinds. Instead of interfering with one another, major chords coexist, inhabiting distinct colors and registers. Composer Norman Kay called this technique the “emancipation of consonance,” wherein consonant chords relieved from traditional tonal roles are free to comingle with major triads from distant keys.\textsuperscript{42}

No matter how much harmonic distance the cue travels, it always returns to the tonic of G major. Perhaps Copland saw the basic G major triad as the cue’s symbol for home. If so, “Story of Our Town” cannot go a single phrase or even more than a couple measures without returning home. There is no further harmonic destination, no mounting tension, no struggle between tonal centers. The music does not even modulate away from G major, as if reticent to leave. And as Lerner points out, there is no “dark side” to be found in Grover’s Corners: unlike the works of Copland’s “severe style,” this music is devoid of violent Stravinskian rhythms, Schoenberghian trips into atonality, or a single instrument or entrance that could be called forceful or disruptive.\textsuperscript{43}

The simple major triads of “Story of Our Town” are not the only backwards-looking feature in the cue. Near the end, Copland twice quotes the final phrases of “Home! Sweet Home!,” the favorite tune of nineteenth-century America (see ex. 2).

\textsuperscript{42} Quoted in Lerner, “Copland’s Music of Wide Open Spaces,” 492.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
Example 2: The flute and oboe interpolate the final phrase of “Home! Sweet Home!” (mm. 21-25)

The unheard lyrics that correspond to these phrases—“Be it ever so humble, / There’s no place like home!”—reflect the down-to-earth nature of the townspeople of Grover’s
In the film, Copland appropriately associates Payne’s ode to domestic life with one of *Our Town*’s mothers, Mrs. Gibbs. According to Pollack, it is no coincidence that the tune makes its first appearance accompanying Mrs. Gibbs as she prepares breakfast for her family, fulfilling a traditional domestic role. In the *Our Town* suite, the tune is played two times during each reprise of the cue: first with a polytonal accompaniment that features piquant cross relations, then again, backed by a milder, tonal arrangement. The move from Kay’s “emancipation of consonance” back to clear tonality is a soothing transition, a return to home, sweet home.

The utopia we see in “Story of Our Town” is one associated with the higher powers of nature and religion, one that privileges community and family, one that allows flights of freedom but always returns home. This music is decidedly American: it is devoid of any clear European influences, it makes clear reference to American song, and its pairing of open sonorities with blithe images of Grover’s Corners suggests the uniquely American experience of a small-town life instilled with possibility and freedom. It is a convincing picture of utopia—but it is a disconcerting depiction of home, for three main reasons.

First, without any instance of violence, deprivation, or dread, the film’s depiction of Grover’s Corners seems naïvely incomplete. Without the world’s horrors, there is nothing from which home is a reprieve; when the entire world is safe, the home is no longer special. (*Our Town* was released in 1940, as America’s involvement in World War II loomed near. This explains the film’s pacifism—despite its often dour philosophy, *Our Town* still qualifies as escapist entertainment—but the backdrop of war makes the tenor

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of the film seem especially naïve by comparison. In retrospect, its all-around goodness is hard to swallow. A relevant point of comparison is Ives’s “The Alcotts” and the role it played in the grand scheme of the *Concord Sonata*. Following the inhuman dissonances and horrific fantasies of “Hawthorne,” “The Alcotts” feels like well-deserved respite. Even the most consonant melody of “The Alcotts,” the “human faith melody,” struggles to be heard: its first setting follows a polytonal area combining A minor and E-flat minor, a fraught collision of keys a tritone apart, while the second setting surfaces out of a murky whole-tone texture. There is never a struggle, tonal or otherwise, in Grover’s Corners. Even the polychords of “Story of Our Town” sound entirely consonant and can be satisfyingly explained in the key of G major.

Second, “Story of Our Town,” with its chorale-like harmony and the consistent use of pairing in the accompaniment, is emphatically homogenizing music. The cue fabulously conveys collective identity without convincingly depicting any individuals. Some instruments are instructed to play solo, but this always means trading off with another solo instrument in a sort of instrumental brotherhood, or playing in unison with another instrument playing solo. One obligatory example is Copland’s trademark, the solo trumpet, which never seems to signify one person’s identity; more often, it is the emblematic sound of triumph that Mervyn Cooke calls “the war-film cliché of the noble diatonic trumpet sounding its lone heroic voice.” In “Story of Our Town,” even Copland’s famously solitary trumpet has an accompanying role as it plays in unison with two flutes (see ex. 3). This inescapable collective identity is prevalent in both the play and the film: take the first-person plural pronoun in the play’s title, the Stage Manager’s tendency to blur the lines between the audience and the actors, or the visual symmetries...
between the family lives of the Gibses and the Webbs in the first scene of the film. A purely collective world is not personal or private enough to be a home: there is nothing separating one home from another, nothing that makes the Gibses’ home any different from the Webbs’.

Example 3: No longer “the noble diatonic trumpet sounding its lone heroic voice,” Copland’s trademark trumpet plays in tandem with the flutes (m. 11-15)
Third, there is no hint of any world outside of Grover’s Corners and the characters of Our Town. The place is a self-sufficient, self-contained community, a setting Copland first addressed in his earlier score for The City (1939) and would revisit in the upcoming Appalachian Spring (1944). The title Our Town says it all: once the town’s boundaries are crossed, life ceases to exist for the inhabitants of Grover’s Corners. Even in the play, the town sees few visitors or immigrants, save for the novel technology of the automobile. Again, one virtue of the home is its distance from the hostile and unfamiliar forces in the world, but in a world without any meaningful sense of distance, this virtue is lost. It could be argued that Copland responds to our first two complaints later in the film by composing leitmotifs that capture the subjective emotions of his characters, some of which include the dread and violence we found sorely lacking. But he never provides music for any place beyond the town’s boundaries. Grover’s Corners, like many utopia portrayed in literature, is hermetically sealed from the outside world.

Conclusion: Listening for particulars

“Our Town dared to be simple,” Copland wrote approvingly in his autobiography. Perhaps it was this simplicity that drew Copland all along: his method of paring down and generalizing in order to reach a wide audience made Our Town a felicitous vehicle for his new “simpler style.” In a way, the simplicity of Our Town is its greatest strength;

47 For the two best examples, we need only investigate the character of Emily. She earns one of the film’s few character-specific leitmotifs, a love theme that alternates measures of 4/4 with quadruplets in 3/4; the result is akin to a fluttering heartbeat. See Pollack, Aaron Copland, 345. Later, in Emily’s hallucination scene, Copland suggests Emily’s dread by lingering on an unresolved B-flat augmented triad. It is a simple but brutally effective technique: after so many major triads and perfect fifths, the augmented fifth is an arresting emblem of instability. See Alfred Cochran, “Style, Structure, and Tonal Organization in the Early Film Scores of Aaron Copland,” Ph.D diss. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1986), 250.

48 Copland and Perlis, Copland: 1900 Through 1942, 303.
it explains why *Our Town*’s message is still poignant for modern and foreign audiences.

But when it comes to depicting an American home, this generalizing simplicity is a troublesome characteristic. The concept of home is wrapped up not in generalities but particulars, those memorable sensations and qualities that make my home *mine* and not *yours*. Homes without particulars, like the utopian households of *Our Town*, are indistinguishable and thus unmemorable. For that reason, we would choose any home, no matter how flawed, over utopia. A visit to Copland’s utopia is like a trip to the movies. For ninety minutes we are enchanted and entertained, and we might even fall in love with a character, a setting, or a scene. But when the story ends, the credits roll, and the theater lights go up, it is by no means the end of the world, because we finally get to go home.

Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, the topic of my next chapter, is a piece entirely about particulars. In fact, Barber’s title, which pinpoints a specific time and place, contains more particulars than Copland’s entire score. Between the sensations *Knoxville* depicts (the sounds of screeching cars, the oppression of the humid Southern heat) and the emotions it suggests (a child’s dread and an adult’s desire to relive the past) it is clear that the Knoxville, Tennessee of the 1910s is no utopia. Yet for Barber and his nostalgic narrator, any childhood past is practically perfect: it is suffused with familiar sensations, loving family members, and endearing reminiscences. It might exist solely in the diaphanous world of memory, but even that is more real than Copland’s entirely imagined utopia.
Chapter Three: Strains of Nostalgia in Samuel Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

How American was Samuel Barber? Not very, his compositional track record seems to indicate. Although he was born and raised in West Chester, Pennsylvania, he appears to be a thoroughbred Anglophile who found inspiration in every corner of the English and Irish literary canons: from medieval lyrics written by anonymous Irish monks (*Hermit Songs*, 1953) to Shakespearean tragedy (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1966), from sublime Romantic poetry (*Music for a Scene from Shelley*, 1933) to the polymorphous prose of James Joyce, whose writing inspired eight of Barber’s works. Barber also comes across as a world-traveler, his composer’s pen drawing him to Scandinavia, North Africa, and Latin America. While Copland, a paradigmatic American composer, was setting his *Old American Songs* (1950, 1952), apotheosizing Appalachia, and scoring film adaptations of American literary classics like *Our Town*—in compositions so patriotic they might as well have been written in red, white, and blue ink—Barber’s mind sounded with such abstruse names as the Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, the Greek mythological figure Medea, and the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. He even lived and taught in Italy, where he developed what his editor, Paul Wittke, called a “full-blown love affair” with European life.¹ Barber’s sole experiment into what he called “regional American idioms”—twelve-bar blues, barn dances, boogie-woogie romps—was tellingly titled *Excursions*: “excursions” away from Barber’s beloved cosmopolitan inspirations, “excursions” back home.²

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It took a synergistic duo of tragedies to bring Barber and his music back to the United States for an extended stay. The first tragedy was a staggering set of personal losses. In a letter to his uncle Sidney Homer in the spring of 1947, the usually private Barber reported that the family had “been through some difficult times in West Chester.”

It was an understatement: Barber’s father and aunt were both seriously ill and both died before the year’s end, a devastating double-blow for Barber and his mother. At the same time, the United States was struggling to understand and recuperate from the tragedy of World War II. As Benedict Taylor describes, not only the war but “the increasing industrial and social modernization of the twentieth century” and “the unparalleled advance of scientific and technological capability” of modern warfare made America unrecognizable to itself; to borrow a term from psychology, America was undergoing a nationwide identity crisis. Facing an unquenchable spout of regret, shame, and grief, the nation retreated “to the simple, homespun mythology of itself.” In the arts, this retreat translated to a romanticized view of past icons of comfort and moral clarity, such as the old West, small-town rural life, and plain American hymns and folk tunes, icons we saw epitomized in Copland’s ballets and film scores.

The tragedies that afflicted Barber’s household and his nation were both calamities more easily avoided than confronted, events that compelled Barber to look backward at older, simpler times. In 1947 he composed the work that critics agree is his most “American” accomplishment: a rhapsody for lyric soprano and orchestra named

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3 Ibid., 278.
after its source, James Agee’s prose-poem *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*.\(^6\) Compressed in the piece’s title and its dedication—“In Memory of my Father”—are important aspects of Barber’s idea of home: it is forever situated in a particular time and place, it is tangled up in ideas of memory and family, and it is both defined and disfigured by death.

The home in *Knoxville* is saturated in nostalgia—a concept that seems easy enough to grasp but is actually as multivalent as the chief protagonist of this study, the American home. Svetlayna Boym, an American literary critic who has written about nostalgia, traces the heritage of the word to two Greek roots, *nostos* (“return home”) and *algia* (“longing” or “pain”).\(^7\) Both translations of *algia* are present in nostalgia: the longing for a previous home and the painful recognition that a return to a home that “no longer exists or has never existed” outside of memory is impossible. Nostalgia amounts to the push and pull of two opposing emotional components: “a sentiment of loss and displacement” and “a romance with one’s own fantasy,” a mature recognition and a childishly naïve reverie, respectively. One reason that the idea of nostalgia is so slippery is that these emotional ingredients can vary, engendering nostalgias of different tints and flavors. Another variable is nostalgia’s subject: who is the one remembering, memorializing, and striving to return home. According to Boym, nostalgia blends personal emotion and social condition; it is situated “between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.” Barber’s case is the perfect example: his personal, familial tragedy harmonized with greater social currents, creating one compounded emotion.

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\(^6\) Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 293.

\(^7\) Quotes in this paragraph come from Taylor, “Nostalgia and Cultural Memory,” 220.
Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* presents nostalgia in all its multiplicity and depth. Over the course of the piece, Barber evokes various different strains of nostalgia: mild wistfulness, dreamy reminiscence, desperation with the present that thrusts one backwards in time, and Proustian temporal teleportation. Taken all together, the diverse nostalgias of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* constitute a sharply delineated psychological portrait, one that intimates how Barber and his fellow Americans felt about home in 1947. Not that Barber pulled off the feat singlehandedly: his music can be entirely explained as a half-faithful, half-rebellious reaction to James Agee’s inimitable text.

*Agee’s Knoxville*

Although Barber admired the whole of Agee’s poem when he read it in *The Partisan Reader* in 1946, he ended up paring down the text for his setting. The portions of the poem he set are reproduced below:

> 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 has become that time of evening when 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. People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard, and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squaring with clowns in hueless amber. A streetcar raising its iron moan; stopping; belling and starting, stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog
its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts; the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter; fainting, lifting, lifts, faints foregone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose.

Low in the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes...

Parents on porches: rock and rock: From damp strings morning glories: hang their ancient faces.

The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchant my eardrums.

On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there….They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine...with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, onquilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night. May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away.

After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.  

The plot of Knoxville: Summer of 1915 is easy to summarize: an adult—a clear surrogate for Agee—reminiscens on his childhood, recounting a torrid evening in the small

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suburban Southern town of Knoxville, Tennessee. But plot is an inadequate tool to
capture a poem that is largely about a narrator with one foot in his idealized childhood
and the other in his less-than-perfect adult present. Neither does plot take into account the
hybrid genre of the prose-poem, a nineteenth-century invention that splices the genes of
poetry and prose. (Agee perceptively called it his “amphibious style,” highlighting its
versatility and grace.)\(^9\) Finally, it fails to explain the poem’s appeal to readers who do not
share Agee’s Southern upbringing, let alone his ecstatic memories.

Ultimately, *Knoxville* is an effort to capture, in retrospect, the emotional and
sensual experience of an early twentieth-century American childhood. It achieves this
through a composite narrator who is simultaneously a lyrical first-person speaker and a
stand-in for a collective persona. Despite the precisely specified time and place in its title,
Agee’s poem reaches beyond Knoxvillians, even beyond Southerners. Agee’s audience
includes any adult who remembers the particular sights and sounds of suburban life—it
has what *Our Town* glaringly lacks, a diligent attention to recognizable particulars. As
Heyman points out, Agee and Barber had a knack for selecting sensations that were both
powerfully evocative and yet not tied down to any region; a diverse array of performers
ranging from Leontyne Price, who grew up in a black neighborhood in Laurel,
Mississippi, to Eleanor Steber, who grew up in a white neighborhood in Wheeling, West
Virginia, identified strongly with the poem and Barber’s setting.\(^10\) Besides mimicking
sensations, *Knoxville* also conveys a brand of existential dread unique to Americans,
concluding by shining a light on the frightening flipside of America’s most beloved topic:

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\(^10\) See Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 293, which features choice quotes from the two sopranos. Steber: “That was exactly my childhood!” Price: “As a southerner, it expresses everything I know about my roots and about my mama and father…my home town….”
freedom. With complete freedom comes nauseating uncertainty, like the dread of a child who loses his parents in a crowd. These emotions fuel the poem’s final line, the narrator’s stammering outcry that his family “will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.”

Barber strongly identified with Agee’s words. As he told Homer in the same 1947 letter, *Knoxville* reminded him “so much of summer evenings in West Chester, now very far away, and all of you are in it!”\(^{11}\) In one interview, Barber waxes eloquent over *Knoxville*’s concluding note of pain, its summation of a “child’s feeling of loneliness, wonder, and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep.” Agee’s poem was so moving and inspiring, Barber claimed, that the effect was “immediate and intense… I must have composed *Knoxville* within a few days.” According to at least one interview, “a few days” is deceptive shorthand for “a few months”; Barber had difficulty setting Agee’s ungainly text, and would eventually excise the majority of the original poem, setting only its final third. The excision turned out to be a serendipitous decision—Barber happened to pick the section of *Knoxville* with the broadest appeal. His omissions include phrases that inhibit the demographic of the poem—such as the poem’s description of “fairly solidly middle class” neighborhoods—and several South-specific sections: a roster of the local flora, and one of the poem’s many paragraphs on locusts.

For modern readers, it might be surprising to hear Barber’s strong emotional response to *Knoxville*. Save for the clear sentiment of the last line, emotion remains latent in Agee’s *Knoxville*. As an unfavorable early reviewer of Barber’s *Knoxville* pointed out, Agee’s words “do not lend themselves to dramatic interpretation [and]… do not suggest

\(^{11}\) All quotes in this paragraph come from Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 279.
the tension of an emotional climax.”¹² The reviewer was perhaps referring to the lawless genre of the prose-poem, Agee’s use of stream-of-consciousness writing, or the poem’s tendency to ramble in lengthy, Whitmanesque shopping lists of description. Or he was referring to the text’s dearth of outward exclamations of emotion, strangely contrasted with what Nathan Broder calls the “passionate outbursts” so prevalent in Barber’s setting, such as the moment midway through the piece when the orchestra unexpectedly erupts into a fortissimo traffic jam of noise (m. 41).¹³

Instead of overtly expressing emotion, Agee, in his own oblique way, taps into his readers’ emotions by vividly reconstructing the South of the past, crafting a portrait of the natural and manmade sights of 1915. Agee’s chief tool is mimesis—the verbal duplication of the essential sights, smells, and sounds that Americans of his generation would recognize and cherish. He directs his narrator to act as a documentarian, a cataloguer of sense-data. Much of Knoxville reads as unembellished lists of sounds (“[a horse’s] hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling”) and of tastes (“vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard, and starched milk”). Speaking of the piece’s full-bodied array of sensations, Leontyne Price claimed she “could smell the South in it.”¹⁴ The most appropriate word for Agee’s lyric—and a misleading and inappropriate word for Barber’s music—is impressionistic, meaning art that privileges sensory impressions over objective reality.

¹² John W. Riley, Boston Globe, 10 April 1948, excerpted in Heyman, Samuel Barber, 290.
Several critics have detected Proustian overtones in Agee’s attention to taste.\(^{15}\) In “the madeleine episode” of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust’s adult narrator tastes a tea-soaked *madeleine*, a traditional French sponge cake he adored in his youth. This simple sensation triggers a string of childhood memories, transporting the narrator outside of time and into a sublime space where “the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory.”\(^{16}\) The same moment transpires in *Knoxville*, with “vanilla, strawberry” ice cream playing the role of the magical *madeleine*.

Like a Southern Proust, the narrator of *Knoxville* is also blithely unaware of the regular passage of time. Although framed as an adult reflecting on the past, *Knoxville* is told almost entirely in the present tense. The poem stridently rings with the ubiquitous “ings” of present participles. In the space of one sentence, for example, a single street car is described as “stopping, belling and starting,” then “rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan,” accompanied by a “cracking and cursing” black spark.\(^{17}\) Read in quick succession, these “ings” chime like an alarm clock, alerting the reader to the present vividness of these reminiscences.

While the present tense predominates, time never progresses at a steady pace for long in *Knoxville*; Agee’s watch speeds and slows. The poem sinuously slithers between the past and present, to a dizzying degree. In some sentences, it seems that Agee alone can trace his poem’s erratic syntax. Take the “street car raising its iron moan.” At first,

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the street car, its moan, and its bleak spark all chug along in the present tense, the “ings” of the present participles keeping time like a metronome. Then the “ings” cut out:

…the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts, the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter, fainter, lifting, lifts, faints forgiven: forgotten.18

The general direction of the sentence is one long grammatical ritardando, from the immediacy of the present tense to the finality of the past tense. This overall shift in tense cleverly mimics the decaying sound of the bell, as the street car travels into the inaudible distance. The confusing pleasure of this sentence lies in following the sentence’s chronology word by word, breezing through the present participles (“rising,” “stinging,” “lifting”), darting through the present-tense verbs (“rises,” “faints,” “halts”), and stalling on the past tense (“risen,” “forgone,” “forgotten”). “Forgotten” is a powerhouse of a word: it is not only the decisive conclusion to a tortuous sentence, but also a categorically negative descriptor in a poem that attests to the power of memory.

Agee reserves the future tense for the poem’s final sentences, as his narrator, surrounded by his family on the comfortable “rough wet grass of the backyard,” ponders his frightening future moments before going to sleep.19 “Who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth?” he precociously pines. When no reassuring words are forthcoming, all the narrator can do is pray for his family, asking for God’s blessing in the eventual “hour of their taking away”—an ambiguous phrase that alludes both to the narrator’s imminent bedtime and the eventual death of his family members.

Oddly, the poem ends with the two words “I am”—one of only three appearances of the word “I” in the poem, a remarkable scarcity for a poem narrated in the first person.

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 7.
This final “I am” is deeply uncertain, the polar opposite of Descartes’ infallible “I think, therefore I am.” It is not only the “I am” of a disingenuous child who has no conception of what it means to “be.” It is also the ironic “I am” of a narrator inhabiting the non-existent world where childhood and adulthood overlap, the “I am” of a cipher.

Agee’s narrator does not always sound this profound: he mostly adheres to a child’s plain diction, only occasionally interlarding his speech with the sophisticated words of an adult. He views the past with what we might think of as temporal bifocals, the perspective of a child sidled against the perspective of an adult—or perhaps this narrator is, as one critic suggests, an “adult trapped in the body of a child.” This tug-of-war between adult erudition and childlike simplicity plays out unerringly in the poem. These two opposing poles can even coexist in the same sentence:

> It has become that time of evening when 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, hangers.

Agee’s narrator approaches this sentence with an adult’s careful distance, the stilted introduction of “It has become that time of evening when…” As the sentence progresses, a child’s voice becomes audible in the galloping rhythm of “rócking géntly and táling géntly” and in the sentence’s exhilarated succession of “ands.” But this child’s play is swiftly muffled by the adult complexity of “the standing up into their sphere of possession,” and the alliteration in the abstruse phrase, “hung havens, hangers.” These shifts in point-of-view mirror nostalgia’s superimpositions of the past and present selves, its temporal kaleidoscoping.

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Knoxville’s back-and-forth between the perspectives of a child and an adult is only one of its struggles between two opposing forces. No reader can neatly reconcile Agee’s preoccupations with the quotidian—the small-town traffic, the listless couples on porches, the dutiful husbands watering the lawns—with the unmitigated existential dread of his conclusion, or the fluency of the former with the latter’s stammering “will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever…” Agee confuses matters more with his peculiar choice of genre—the prose-poem, an unusual grafting of prose’s accessibility and clarity onto poetry’s compactness and affection for rhythm and repetition. If Agee’s protean prose is difficult for the average reader, it is even more difficult for Barber, who in his setting bravely decides to give form to writing that appears formless.

If there is one word that can sum up Agee’s Knoxville, perhaps it is “Joycean,” an epithet bestowed on it by the poet Mark Doty in his biography of Agee, tellingly titled Tell Me Who I Am. Doty cites James Joyce as the largest influence on Agee, pointing to Agee’s autobiographical obsessions and anti-authority stances as fundamental Joycean attributes.22 Knoxville in particular recalls the first few pages of Joyce’s first novel, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, which was coincidentally first published in 1915. Both passages serve as prefaces for larger works: the enigmatic first pages of Portrait introduce the narrator, Stephen Dedalus, through the elliptical thoughts of a young child, while Knoxville: Summer of 1915, though originally published on its own in The Partisan Review, earned its primary prestige as the opening chapter to Agee’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, A Death in the Family. Ultimately, the goal of each passage is to write about a child’s perspective by writing through it—employing the awkward repetitions, singsong rhythms, and jump-cut transitions associated with a child’s dialect and

22 Doty, Tell Me Who I Am, 37-38.
consciousness. When certain sentences from the two novels are placed one against the other, the similarities provoke a sort of double-vision:

AGEE: One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my father who is good to me. One is my mother who is good to me.  

JOYCE: The Vances lived in number seven. They had a different father and mother. They were Eileen’s father and mother.

Agee might have learned about the strong bonds between childhood memory and music from Joyce, who opens Portrait with snippets from three children’s songs, heralding a fascination with song and wordplay that haunts the whole novel. Agee, too, must have realized the impact of music on memory at an early age. In his essay “The Boldest of All the Sounds of Night: Music in the Early Life of James Agee,” the critic Jack Neely explains that “music was all over” in Knoxville; between Knoxville’s disproportionately active classical music scene and the strong musical presence in the town’s churches, “it would be difficult for a kid born in 1909 to not be interested in music.” As for Agee’s personal musical predilections, Neely mentions Agee’s “devotion to both Beethoven and the blues”—coincidentally, both can be heard in Barber’s setting, between the Romantic swoops in the strings (m. 20) and the soprano’s Mixolydian riffing (m. 25). But as Neely writes, Agee’s most lasting tribute to the music he loved was, in fact, the short prose of Knoxville: Summer of 1915. The piece “is in itself musical,” as Agee, “almost like a music critic… describes the pitch of almost-orchestral sounds of a suburban twilight.” Neely particularly praises Agee’s vivid depiction of

23 Agee, A Death in the Family, 7.
26 Ibid., 71.
Knoxville’s seasonal residents, the locusts, “a loud and distinctively orchestral accompaniment to the Knoxville summer.”²⁷

“Music critic” is probably the wrong title for Agee. His narrator, awash in the sonic ocean of nighttime Knoxville, lacks the critical distance to evaluate the sound around him. More appropriately, Agee can be seen as a musician, one who not only describes the sounds of Knoxville in lapidary detail but also contributes to the cacophony, adding everything from simple repetition (“People go by; things go by”) to percussive alliteration (the cavalcade of /k/ sounds in an automobile’s “bleak spark crackling and cursing”). He is also a composer, orchestrating the poem’s measured repetitions and stop-start rhythms. Like a music score, Knoxville is inert on the page; it becomes animated in performance. When read aloud, its bravura manipulation of the sound of language springs to life.

**Barber’s Knoxville and the “points that aren’t there”**

Critics have long lauded Barber’s Knoxville as a remarkably faithful adaptation of Agee’s text. H. Wiley Hitchcock describes the relationship between Agee’s text and Barber’s music with a felicitous family-metaphor as “the perfect marriage.”²⁸ The two Knoxvilles do occasionally divorce: for example, Barber’s setting reaches early emotional heights that have no analogues in Agee’s writing. Ascertaining these divergences—the moments when, as one critic pejoratively put it, Barber “tried to make points that aren’t there”²⁹—

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²⁷ Ibid., 72.
is the key to uncovering Barber’s own voice, a voice too often hidden behind Agee’s idiosyncratic words.

The clearest Barberian addition is the imposition of a discernable formal template atop Agee’s formless writing. The widespread consensus is that Knoxville is a five-part rondo with a thrice-recurring refrain (ABACA). If Knoxville does qualify as a rondo, it is a rondo only in the loosest, most lenient sense: Knoxville segues too fluidly from section to section and embarks on too many melodic detours to be a conventional rondo. Nathan Broder, in his appreciation of the composer, expounds on Barber’s unique facility with traditional forms. His general comment on Barber’s larger works applies perfectly to the supposed rondo structure of Knoxville:

One seldom…has the impression of a slavish reliance upon well tested models; instead, all sorts of changes are rung on the traditional procedures, and the resulting structures usually seem the logical ones for imaginative and well integrated treatment of the material.

Barber’s decision to bring back his refrain is not simply a formal device; it is the clever application of one of classical music’s most repetitious, cyclical forms to a piece about memory. The refrain recurs as if remembered, inflected by what came before, made dramatically different through subtle alterations.

Barber’s own classification of the piece as a “lyric rhapsody” is the most appropriate musical analogue to Agee’s paradoxical prose-poem: “lyric” connotes brevity, precise form, personal expression, and a prominent vocal part, while “rhapsody” suggests extravagant lengths, a conscious defiance of form, and a prominent instrumental

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30 See Heyman, Samuel Barber, 281; Broder, Samuel Barber, 63; Taylor, “Nostalgia and Cultural Memory,” 213; or, best of all, Kreiling, “The Songs of Samuel Barber,” 182, which boasts a handy, persuasive chart of the piece’s structure.
31 Broder, Samuel Barber, 57.
part. The term conveys how Barber—whom Broder considers “primarily a lyric poet,” a composer driven by a desire to express emotion rather than to push any stylistic envelopes—amplifies the private emotions of a single adult into a full-bodied orchestral piece. One of Broder’s general claims about Barber—that his music was “not of the sort that required the forging of an individual idiom” but instead “could be best expressed in an existing and well known tongue”—applies particularly well to Knoxville, which one innovation-hungry critic derided for its “luxuriant conservatism.”

The other drastic large-scale shift that Barber implements in his setting is an exponential increase in the number of Knoxville’s voices. Agee’s Knoxville is “scored” for one instrument—the soliloquizing first-person narrator, performing solo. All of the sounds Agee employs, from the alliteration and repetition on the poetry’s surface and the sounds illustrated within that poetry, are voiced through the speaker’s monologue. Barber, by contrast, orchestrates his Knoxville for a soprano backed by a chamber orchestra of thirteen instrumentalists. The most distinctive of the instruments in terms of tone color and symbolic heft is the harp, an indicator of the presence of a narrator and a standard instrumental icon of magic and transformation in European art music since Monteverdi’s L’Orfeo (1607). The association with the supernatural still holds in Barber’s American, twentieth-century artwork. In Barber’s Knoxville, the closest thing to magic is memory, a force with the power to conflate the past and the present, to

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33 Broder, Samuel Barber, 58.
reinvigorate the dead. As Felsenfeld succinctly writes, the harp’s unerring eighth-note accompaniment in the refrain represents “the easy flow of memory.”35 Whenever the rondo’s refrain is about to be “remembered” by the rondo, the harp’s eighth notes come in, suffusing the section with memory’s gauzy haze.

“I always wonder why it was set for soprano,” one reviewer admitted.36 Listeners familiar with the male-dominated storyline of A Death in the Family or the father-focused passages of the unabridged Knoxville might reasonably expect a tenor to embody Agee’s voice. But Barber’s decision to administer a sex change on his narrator is not as perplexing as it seems. Writing for a soprano allows Barber to create a vocal narrator that accommodates the full scope of Knoxville, from the childlike color of the lower end of the soprano’s range to the ethereal, inhuman high notes that correspond to the narrator’s anguished cries. Barber consciously dilutes the male narrative of Agee’s novel—he excises the paragraph-long, detailed discussion of men “hosing their lawns” that might make Freud smile.37 By striving for gender-neutrality, Barber produces a work of wider appeal, an account of suburban America that appeals to all, and not only to male Americans. It is one of the “points that aren’t there” in Agee’s poem, one that is thankfully present in Barber’s adaptation.

Nostalgia as comfort: the refrain

Knoxville opens with a note of misdirection. Listeners expecting a sonic depiction of twentieth-century suburbia in the American South are instead treated to the conventions

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35 Felsenfeld, Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber, 156.
37 Agee, A Death in the Family, 4.
of the pastoral style, typified by an emphasis on woodwinds, close adherence to a major key, and folksy modal melodies (see ex. 1).  

Barber’s grafting of the centuries-old pastoral genre onto a piece set in decades-old suburbia might come across as a jarring anachronism—it is hard to imagine the pastoral’s innocuous shepherds living in harmony with the rickety automobiles that populate Agee’s poem. Yet by invoking the pastoral, Barber suggests that Knoxvillians lead lives as innocent and uncontaminated as those of rural shepherds. By appropriating and deftly misusing European musical symbols, Barber idealizes the American home in Knoxville’s very first measures.

This introduction elides into the A section of Knoxville, the thrice-recurring waltzing refrain that opens, bisects, and closes the piece. Here, Barber imbues the entire orchestra with a pervasive rocking: circular arpeggios in the harp and flute, the soprano’s sway between quarter- and eighth-notes, and the obsessive back-and-forth in the clarinet, harp, and viola between C# and D, and E and F#. Along with the 12/8 meter and the

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38 Taylor, “Nostalgia and Cultural Memory,” 213.
soprano’s simple pentatonic melody, the music suggests the comforting sounds of a lullaby (see ex. 2).

Example 2: The first appearance of Knoxville’s A section, distinguished by its pervasive rocking (mm. 5-11)
In one of the many instances of mimesis in the “waltzing refrain,” the rocking mirrors Knoxvillians “on their porches, rocking gently.” In this section, Barber seems to replicate the sounds of Agee’s *Knoxville* wherever possible, exploiting the full onomatopoeic range of his soprano and orchestra.

Example 3: Barber’s onomatopoeic mimicry of “a loud auto; a quiet auto” and “people in pairs, not in a hurry” (mm. 19-21)
He loyally reproduces Agee’s poetic effects and evocations of sound; he would have agreed with one reviewer that “the music is in the prose; there is nothing to ‘complete.’” Muted horns do their best impressions of distant automobiles; pairs of woodwinds portray happy couples, wandering off together in parallel thirds (see ex. 3). In the refrain’s second appearance, locusts scuttle up and down the strings by semitones (see ex. 4); their erratic melodies recall the chromatic critters of Béla Bartók’s “Music of the Night” from his 1926 piano suite, *Out of Doors*. In each of these examples, the soprano always precedes the onomatopoeia with a line of introduction: “a loud auto, a quiet auto,” “people in pairs,” and “the dry and exalted noise of the locusts,” respectively. Where Agee’s narrator was a documentarian that reported on sounds, Barber’s narrator is practically a magician, conjuring sounds into being from thin air. This causal reversal is one of several elements of unreality in Barber’s *Knoxville*, a reminder that this piece is not an objective account, but the product of a subjective consciousness.

Example 4: The strings mimic “the dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air” (mm. 125-27)

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The soprano is not simply an announcer; Barber directs the voice to mimic the sounds of Agee’s *Knoxville*, to playful results. The soprano’s introduction of the locusts includes an un-virtuosic drone of thirteen repetitions of a low F# (see ex. 5).

Example 5: The soprano’s monotonous introduction of the locusts (mm. 120-23)

When the soprano describes the citizens of Knoxville as talking “casually,” Barber draws out the word, anticlimactically ending the phrase with a *diminuendo* and a perfect-fifth drop. The orchestra likewise drops from the emotional lift of B major to the piece’s starting key of A major. The music settles, leaning back like a Knoxvillian in a rocking chair (see ex. 6).
Example 6: The soprano sings a line “cas - - - - - ually” (mm. 22-24)

Though onomatopoeia is one of the chief techniques here, the refrain’s pervasive rocking transcends purely literal onomatopoeia, evoking a broad range of connotations and a particular time and place. Combined with the woodwind-heavy instrumentation and
placid pace, the rocking has led critics to call this passage a “quasi-pastoral.” At the same time, the rocking seems to connote both the languishing Southern heat, and a lullaby for our narrator, contentedly dreaming of the past. There is even something unmistakably childlike to the rocking; as Barber’s biographer Barbara Heyman claims, the refrain’s recitative-like declamatory style mimics “the swinging rhythms that haunt the chants of childhood.” These rhythms serve as the backbone for a refrain that is all about comfort: the comfort found in Agee’s nostalgic words, in the lullaby-like texture that suggests the security of sleep, in the soprano’s folksy pentatonic melody, in the immaculate A-major tonality, and in the concept of the refrain itself as a recurring, familiar sound. There is no agony in the soprano’s recollections so far—on the contrary, there is a love of Knoxville’s natural sounds and even a sense of play and joy detectable in the voice’s mimicry. Thus the strain of nostalgia we hear in this section is more “longing” than “pain,” a feeling of naïve, easy reminiscence devoid of present-day anxiety.

Nostalgia as reliving: the traffic jam

Barber’s description of Knoxville as a free-flowing lyric rhapsody begins to make sense as the music undergoes wild and rapid transformation. The narrator’s opening reverie soon becomes a nightmare. By measure 40, the rocking arpeggios in the flute and harp have subsided; the lush orchestration has thinned to a soft string chorale and distant cries in the woodwinds; the easygoing pentatonic scale of the opening melody has been pulled apart at the seams, broadened into expansive fifths and sixths. These changes, though

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41 Heyman, Samuel Barber, 281.
42 Ibid., 280.
significant, occur gradually, and do not come across as jarring. The very next measure, however, brings a shocking turnaround. Barber shoves the listener into an on-going traffic jam, flipping all of the defining elements of the opening reverie upside-down. He abruptly doubles the piece’s tempo, jolting into a galvanizing Allegro agitato, and he heralds the new section with fortissimo exclamations in all registers (see ex. 7).
Example 7: The jarring shift from the comfort of the A section to the anxiety of the B section (mm. 37-45). Measures 42-45 introduce the three-note car-horn motive that pervades the episode.

The “quasi-pastoral” sounds of the opening give way to the strident shrieks of machinery; the comfort of the piece’s refrain transforms into menace. The immaculate major-key tonality of the reverie is shattered, as instruments switch back and forth between grating chromatic lines and three-note motives that span large intervals in imitation of honking car-horns. Adding to the confusion is a newfound rhythmic
complexity: a score formerly inhabited by quarter- and eighth-notes now teems with quintuplets and thirty-second notes. In the refrain, the instruments were courteous, making way for one another and working in harmony. In contrast, the Allegro agitato is an orchestral free-for-all, with each instrument pitched at a rude fortissimo, entering and exiting in haphazard formation.

It takes nineteen tumultuous measures of the traffic jam’s terror for the soprano to build up the courage to sing. Had she entered sooner, she might have trivialized the entrance of the agitato, lessening its impact with her lucid explanations. Instead, the cacophony is left unnamed, unresolved. For the first time in the piece, we must interpret Barber’s music on our own, without the soprano acting as our guide. In the easygoing refrain, the soprano had the opportunity to explain everything she witnessed; back then, the orchestra waited on her, giving her space to talk. When the soprano finally enters in the agitato, she is too caught up in the raucous tumult of the orchestra to step back and explain that we are inside a traffic jam; now, the orchestra waits for nobody. Unlike in her reveries, the soprano is unable to command the sounds around her. She is now on equal footing with the listener, struggling to make sense of the traffic-jam in real-time. As Felsenfeld writes, this change marks the appearance of “a new sort of nostalgia”—not the earlier “easy, quiescent memories,” but a “thrust headlong into an intense, Proustian rush.”

Barber’s move to the Allegro agitato is not an explicit allusion to Proust, but its volley of associations and sensations approximates the spontaneous rush of the madeleine episode like nothing else in the piece. When Barber moves from the waltz refrain to the immediacy of the Allegro agitato, the shift is near-tectonic, as if one piece suddenly

43 Felsenfeld, Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber, 152.
ended and another began without missing a beat. Barber creates a true event with a beginning, middle, and end, thus bestowing form on Agee’s formless writing.

This section’s emphasis on technology—what Kreiling calls the “intrusion of urban growth and mechanization”—is not entirely new. We heard technology’s representatives in the refrain, “a loud auto; a quiet auto,” called forth by the soprano and rendered by the horns. In the traffic jam, technology is not so manageable. Yet even though the extreme density and dynamics of the traffic jam make it a terrifying counterpart to the somnolent comfort of the refrain, this section still evokes nostalgia—only instead of the nostalgia of comfort, this is the nostalgia of reliving, of re-experiencing, of a delusional reprise of the past. Barber brings back the past by instilling the traffic jam with all of the onomatopoeia he can muster, by making it the most aurally “lifelike” moment in Knoxville.

Significantly, nothing in Agee’s text justifies the abrupt shift into the Allegro agitato. Barber’s twenty-eight-measure-long instrumental intermezzo does not correspond to any significant shift or event in Agee’s text. Barber essentially cuts one of Agee’s paragraphs right down the middle, allocating the first half to his waltzing refrain and converting the second half into the Allegro agitato. Over the din of this clangorous traffic jam, with its continual barrage of fortissimo blasts, we hear Barber’s voice for the first time. It seems to communicate an unnamed dread about the past, the fear that not everything in the past is as comfortable as the optimistic refrain implied, that there are situations and settings in our past that do not qualify as home. Essentially, Barber adds a distinction that Agee’s blocky paragraph does not make, separating the past we long for and the past we fear.

44 Kreiling, “The Songs of Samuel Barber,” 188.
We continue to hear Barber’s voice as he slows the traffic jam to a dreamy halt. In a way, Barber imitates Agee’s manipulation of time and tense, compounding it with his own musical effects. The crux of the traffic jam is measure 77 (see ex. 8). Until this point, the traffic jam seemed never-ending, as the episode’s key ingredients—the three-note car-horn motive, fortissimo squawks, rising sixteenth-note chromatic lines—were passed around from instrument to instrument, maintaining the density and volume that caught us so off-guard in measure 41. But when the soprano sings the first words of Agee’s grammatical ritardando (“The iron whine rises on rising speed”), Barber, in a surprising gesture of ironic word-painting, puts the breaks on the music with an orchestra-wide calmando and a thinner, cooler texture.
Example 8: The traffic jam reaches its musical and narrative crux (mm. 73-78)

After thirty-six atonal measures, the orchestra finally reaches tonal sanity in G major, grounded on a dominant-pedal in the bass. The three-note car-horn motive, once maddeningly dissonant, is suppressed across the orchestra as flute, clarinet, and oboe quiet to a hush and the horns apply their mutes. It is as if the traffic-jam is retreating into the distance, its horrible shock becoming a thing of the past. The car-horns actually start to sound sweetly consonant relative to the sturdy G-major tonality. Felsenfeld correctly grasps the change in mood, describing how the “annoying little motive” transforms “from moaning streetcar to, perhaps, fireflies.”

It is only the soprano voice that does not calm down at measure 77, singing syncopated, chromatic lines that mimic the mechanical screeches of “the iron whine” and “the faint stinging bell.” Barber writes a melody that works with and against Agee’s delicate description of the bell rising and falling. In measures 83-86, for example, the

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45 Felsenfeld, *Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber*, 152.
soprano sinks in stepwise drops on the words “fainter, fainting,” ironically dropping a perfect fourth on the word “lifting,” appropriately leaping a minor sixth to a high G on the word “lifts.” This thirty-three-measure sentence culminates with two of the most important moments of the piece: a nadir and climax, one after another. The first moment, a near-inaudible low C starting in measure 90, marks a double “low point”: it is the lowest note the soprano sings in the entire piece, coupled with the word “forgotten,” which Barber must have realized is the most negative word in Agee’s recollection-laden poem (see ex. 9).
Example 9: “forgotten...”: Knoxville reaches its double “low point” (mm. 87-91)

Immediately following the collapse of “forgotten” is the long arpeggiated ascent accompanying the line “Now is the night one blue dew” (mm. 94-100). The mechanical disorder of the traffic jam gives way to the rehabilitating purity of nature, emblemized by the expanse of night. Felsenfeld hears religious overtones in the sweet strings and the
ranging voice,\textsuperscript{46} but the upward surge and the association with nature also suggest the opening of Copland’s \textit{Appalachian Spring} (1944). The arpeggio is almost perfect, but not quite: the soprano hits A, C, E, and a high G, but oversteps a high A, holding out “night” on a high B-flat—her highest note in the piece—as the orchestra underlies a chord almost entirely constructed of a whole-tone collection (see ex. 10). Here, in a purely Barberian moment, time stops. We are left in a moment of mystery: the mystery of the sentence’s odd syntax (what exactly is “the night one blue dew”?!) and the mystery of a harmony that is neither part of the refrain’s unblemished major key nor of the traffic jam’s thorny atonality.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 153.
Example 10: “Now is the night one blue dew.” With those enigmatic words, the soprano tries to adumbrate a pure, natural arpeggio, but overshoots her target (mm. 97-101)

In a piece about home, the whole-tone intrusion marks a moment of homelessness, symbolized by key-lessess. The whole-tone-inflected chord slides into
the original home key of A major; the soprano tries again for a perfect arpeggio with an
A-major arpeggio, but she falters again into the whole-tone universe. Here, Barber makes
a point that is not present in Agee’s *Knoxville*—that there is a mysterious beauty in
nature, but it can provide no security or stability. The harrowing traffic jam was no home
for the soprano and neither is nature. As the episode draws to a close and the refrain,
signaled by the harp, begins anew, the sense is that we have spent a good deal of time in
the past without encountering a truly habitable home—the refrain is too naïve and
comfortable, while the recent interruption was too unsettling and violent. To find
Barber’s true idea of home, we must turn to the final episode of *Knoxville*.

**Nostalgia as desperation: “…who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth?”**
As the second occurrence of the refrain fizzles out with the strings’ imitation of locusts,
the setting moves from the domestic security of rocking porches to the vulnerable
openness of the backyard, where the narrator sits on quilts with family and friends. The
change in scene might seem to be inconsequential, but the difference between the secure
world of the house and the vast environment of the yard is the difference between two
types of nostalgia: the mild nostalgia of comfort and the ecstatic nostalgia of freedom. As
soon as the section begins, a sense of liberation and the open expanse of the backyard are
signaled by Coplandesque chains of perfect fourths and fifths in the cello and bassoon
(see ex. 11).
Example 11: The opening of the scene in the back yard (mm. 125-39)

A similar freedom announces itself in the vocal line. Liberated from her repetitious pentatonic melody, the soprano is free to sing melodies dashed with joyous high As that exhibit the extent of her range (see ex. 12).
Example 12: The episode in the back yard features a more versatile, euphoric vocal line (mm. 140-45)

This multifaceted freedom seems to be a boon at first, as the soprano sings in buoyant lines of roaming “the rough wet grass of the back yard,” talking “of nothing in particular at all,” and seeing all the stars, all “wide and alive.” But the freedom becomes too much for her; the child inside this narrator cannot grasp a world so huge and unordered. The section’s bright F major dims to F minor/A-flat major, and the soprano starts a dour question with a minor ninth, Barber’s intervallic icon of excessive freedom, or else unmanageable vastness (see ex. 13). In a moment that reveals the adult voice nestled in the narrator’s childlike persona, the soprano finishes the question: “…who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth?”—to which there is no reply. Here, we uncover the final nostalgia of Knoxville, the nostalgia formed when an adult uneasy with the mortality and suffering of the present day reverts to childhood in desperation. This feeling is far removed from the benign associations we often have in mind when we mention nostalgia; this strain of nostalgia drives right to the root of the word, the algia or pain.
Example 13: Minor ninths and a shift from F major to F minor herald the soprano’s mounting existential dread (mm. 180-86)

Since none of the family members can resolve these unanswerably deep questions, the protagonist turns to God. Over a pastoral woodwind texture that recalls the very opening of the piece, the soprano sings a hymn that begs God’s blessing: “May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them
kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away.” For most of the sentence, the key is D minor, a famous key of bereavement and death for European composers like Mozart, Schubert, and Liszt. And for a second it seems that the soprano’s prayer concerning “the hour of their taking away” will end in mournful D minor. But the last word of the sentence, “away,” lands on a sforzando F-sharp-minor triad, leading immediately back into the refrain in its original key of A major (see ex. 14). The unexpected yet resolute introduction of a distant harmony appears like a flash of divine intervention, as the positive nature of the home is confirmed by some superhuman force. It is in this spiritual connection that we locate the true home in Barber’s *Knoxville*: in what Wilfred Mellers calls Barber’s “equation between God’s love and Home.”47 In *Knoxville* it is God, and not the narrator’s family, that gives the home its security and sanctity. Only a force on the order of God has the answers to the all-important existential question (“tell me who I am”) posed by the narrator of *Knoxville*. And invoking God is the only way Barber can justify the perfection of the home he has created. In Mellers’s blunt assessment, “Barber needs God, in a negative sense, in order to preserve his innocence: to make it possible for him to retreat to the security of ‘home’ without self-embarrassment.”48

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48 Ibid.
Example 14: The soprano’s hymn for her family ends on an unexpected chord (mm. 215-21)
Conclusion: Copland makes a cameo

The moment it premiered, *Knoxville* garnered comparisons to the works of Aaron Copland. Barber himself drew the link; listening to a radio performance of *Knoxville* shortly before he died, Barber exclaimed, “I think I did almost as well as Aaron here, don’t you?” Copland never explicitly made any comparisons, though he once admitted he would have gladly set Agee’s poem if Barber hadn’t done it already. “It’s just as well it happened the way it did or we wouldn’t have Sam’s beautiful score,” he said, probably between his teeth. For the most part, the comparisons are well-grounded. In *Knoxville*, Barber exhibits an uncharacteristic preference for fourths, fifths, and sevenths, the intervallic morphemes of Copland’s “simpler” style. Perhaps the most convincing Coplandism in *Knoxville* is the piece’s final harmony: a gargantuan chord comprising an A-major triad with an added second and a seventh, all separated by roomy intervals of fifths, sixths, and more. It crossbreeds tonic and dominant in a manner nearly identical to the arpeggiated opening and closing of Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* (see ex. 15).

49 Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 294. Heyman adds that Italian composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who was with Barber at the time, claimed the remark was ironic.
50 Ibid.
51 Taylor, “Nostalgia and Cultural Memory,” 224.
Example 15: The final, arguably “Coplandesque” bars of *Knoxville* (mm. 258-63)

Placing Copland’s *Our Town* and Barber’s *Knoxville* side by side, bridging the two middle chapters of this study, we can draw even broader similarities. Both pieces bordered America’s involvement in World War II—*Our Town* came just before, *Knoxville* arrived just afterward—and both acutely felt the war’s hazardous psychological and social effects. Both scrutinize small-town rural life around the turn of the century, a
time considered admirably chaste and pristine. Both communicate in a tonal language
that privileges consonance and only resorts to dissonance when portraying the harsh and
the undesirable.

Yet Barber’s orchestral work can be called a more persuasive depiction of the
home than Copland’s film score, for two reasons. The first is Barber’s obsessive
cataloguing of particulars, details that Copland left practically untouched in Our Town.
The second lies in Barber’s decision to voice the depiction of the home through a first-
person lyric speaker, instead of the collective persona of Copland’s “Story of Our Town.”
Taylor, writing of the two composers’ portrayals of American rural scenes, tersely
condenses a central difference between Barber and Copland. He asserts that Barber’s
depiction of an American place is “more personal, subjective, and Romantic than
progressive or political.”\textsuperscript{52} Copland’s collective personas are not subjective enough to
pine, to feel pain, or to articulate any of the strains of nostalgia we detect in Knoxville.
Barber’s lyric persona, on the contrary, is the perfect conduit for nostalgia. The exact sort
of nostalgia his persona undergoes is never easy to pin down, but then again, neither is
home, nostalgia’s ultimate goal.

If we asked Barber’s protagonist to answer the final question in Knoxville—“tell
us who you are”—perhaps she’d say Dinah, one of the protagonists of our final piece,
Leonard Bernstein’s Trouble in Tahiti. Bernstein’s tragicomic opera lets us imagine the
life of a married couple that spends slivers of scenes in nostalgic, Knoxvillian reveries—
that is, whenever they aren’t clashing head-to-head in the precarious present. For them,
home is both an object of nostalgia and a fraught present-day situation. In a home that
crowded with contradiction and conflict, there’s no place to live.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 227.
Chapter Four: The Self Versus the Suburbs: Leonard Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti*

The little white house on the stage of Leonard Bernstein’s satirical opera *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952) looks like the best that money can buy. We first see it in the Prelude, as the morning sun is just rising overhead and an average day in the suburbs is beginning (see fig. 1). The audience is immediately subjected to an inexplicable pairing of sight and sound: the image of the domestic ideal emblemized as a quaint house is accompanied by, of all sounds, an unnerving clarinet run that touches on all twelve tones. This strange juxtaposition is momentarily resolved by the soothing sounds of what Bernstein simply calls the Trio—a soprano, a tenor, and a baritone—described by the opera’s production notes as “a Greek Chorus born of the radio commercial.”¹ Positioned around a large studio recording mike, the three sing an ode to domesticity, enumerating the many merits of the little white house, the family inside, and the choice neighborhood they call home. They croon in the plummy voices and gentle swing rhythms of a 1950s radio jingle and a false blitheness that satirically recalls “Home! Sweet Home!”:

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TRIO: Mornin’ sun kisses the windows, kisses the walls
      Kisses the windows, kisses the walls
      Of the little white house;
      Kisses the door-knob, kisses the roof,
      Kisses the door-knob and pretty red roof
      Of the little white house in Scarsdale.²
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² All libretto excerpts are quoted from the 1953 version. See fn. 1.
Figure 1: “The little white house...” In the 1974 television broadcast of Leonard Bernstein’s opera *Trouble in Tahiti* (1952), the action takes place on sketchily animated backdrops, “almost like a child’s version of each scene.”

The image presented on stage and reinforced by the Trio’s lyrics is what Bernstein’s score names “a dream-house,” suffused with sunlight and affection. As the Prelude continues with the Trio’s marketing slogans for marital bliss (“Friendly sun, opens the eyelids, opens the eyes / Of the husband and wife; / Kindles their faces, kindles their love...”), the neighborhood’s unceasingly perfect weather (“Suburbia! Sweet in the Spring, / Healthful in winter, / Saves us the bother of summers in Maine...”) and their appropriate distance from the hustle and bustle of urban life (“Our little spot, out of the hubbub, / Less than an hour by train...”), it becomes clear that this *faux*-radio-commercial

\[3\] Ibid.
is advertising the United States’ trademark product, the American Dream. But the advertisement is never quite perfect: the unnerving clarinet run, which sneaks back in after every verse of the ode, continually disturbs the portrait, throwing the tonally grounded Trio helter-skelter. Those displeasing sounds never fully disappear—not from the music, and not from our minds, where they adulterate the pleasant house we see on stage.

This portrait of the American Dream becomes more and more contaminated as the Prelude progresses. The Trio cannot seem to keep the setting of the opera straight: the first verse ends with “the little white house in Scarsdale”; the second verse with “the little white house in Wellesley Hills”; the third with “the little white house in Ozone Park.” Over the course of the opera, the Trio places the little white house in twelve different suburbs ranging from the boroughs of New York to the sprawl of Los Angeles, all blended together to form the nameless, homogenized habitat known as suburbia. The three previous pieces we have considered—Ives’s *Concord Sonata*, Copland’s *Our Town* and Barber’s *Knoxville, Summer of 1915*—emphasized particular settings, even using those settings for titles. Bernstein, on the contrary, discards all particularities: he leaves the setting of his opera intentionally vague in his production notes, indicating “any American city, and its suburbs.” Unlike Ives’s Concord, Copland’s Grover’s Corners, and Barber’s Knoxville, the location singled out in Bernstein’s title is a red herring: the opera’s comfortable suburbia is an ocean away from exotic Tahiti. We learn the significance of this tropical locale late in the opera: it is the arbitrarily chosen setting of a film viewed by the opera’s characters, admired simply because it is foreign, un-American.

4 Ibid.
As the setting becomes more confusing, the Trio becomes less reliable. Their crooning, conveyed in what Bernstein calls “whispering, breathy pianissimo,” acquires the strange gloss of commercial products. A distasteful irony emerges in the Trio’s singing. It reaches its pinnacle between the third and fourth verses, as the soprano sings a solo that equates brainless scat syllables with classic images of American suburban life: “Ratty Boo. Sofa so far so. Automobee. Ought to be Moby.” The clarinet skirls in counterpoint above, its oddly syncopated lines and strained high register resembling hysterical, derisive laughter (see ex. 1).
Example 1: The soprano (called the “Girl” in the score) juxtaposes meaningless scat syllables and classic Americana (Prelude, mm. 49-60)

As the Prelude draws to a close and the opera proper begins, we meet the family who lives in this “dream-house.” If the clarinet runs and the ironic Trio disturbed this portrait of the American Dream, the family living inside the house directly contradicts it. The opera’s only two dramatic characters, Sam the businessman and Dinah the housewife, are a husband and wife whose marriage is the polar opposite of the sunny picture given by the Trio: they are frigid, petty, and uncommunicative. They have a son, Junior, who they either ignore or exploit as a pawn in their own arguments. His identity is as vapid as his name: a nickname at best, a patronizing title at worst. For the audience, Junior does not exist—he is referred to by the couple, but he is not portrayed by an actor in most productions of the opera—and he might as well not exist for his parents either.

Outside their home, Sam and Dinah are liberated, free to pursue their personal desires and
sing their operatic solos. Inside the home, a single solo is never heard—not even, as Elizabeth L. Keathley points out, from Dinah, the housewife at home in her domestic sphere.\(^5\) Underneath the opera’s glossy surface is this opposition of two apparently irreconcilable forces: the self and the suburbs.

As the opera progresses, the discrepancy between the opera’s two conceptions of home—the American Dream of the Trio’s radio advertisement and the chilly confinement experienced by Sam and Dinah—escalates from ironic juxtaposition to a scathing indictment of American values. The satire comes from, of all people, Leonard Bernstein, who is best known for composing in happy-go-lucky, optimistic moods (his first major success was the 1944 ballet *Fancy Free*) and setting pieces in New York City, the most urban, heterogeneous location in America. Today, Bernstein is best remembered as a celebrity conductor who brought art music to the masses and as a composer of popular theater works with wide-ranging appeal—not for satires that openly lampoon their audiences and their national values. But despite its pervasive irony and unfamiliar suburban territory, *Trouble in Tahiti* should not be seen as an artistic turnaround for Bernstein. To understand why, we need to detour to New York City, where home did not mean “the little white house,” the “friendly sun,” and singsong commercialese. It meant high skyscrapers, garish Broadway lights, and hundreds of languages orchestrated into a uniquely American cacophony.

“New York, New York”: Cultural and musical diversity as home

Whether he was in Tel Aviv or Tanglewood, Vienna or Washington, D.C., Leonard Bernstein always belonged to New York. On paper, his official vocation was the city’s foremost conductor. From the 1940s to the 1950s, he bounced between several assistant and guest conductorships before becoming the first American-born music director of the New York Philharmonic. In actuality he held an impossibly long and varied list of positions, all of which endeared him to his fellow New Yorkers. On television, he was the photogenic face of New York versatility: educating children and adults with equal grace, intrepidly introducing television audiences to avant-garde music, conducting in a histrionic manner that demanded to be put to tape. In the New York Times and other local press, he was a prolific and idiosyncratic author of opinionated articles, faux-Socratic dialogues on music appreciation, and unforgivably bad poetry.

It was in his compositions that Bernstein’s close relation to his hometown was most pronounced. In a Bernstein composition, the neighborhoods of New York did not simply constitute setting: they played starring roles, displaying the depth of characters and arousing audiences’ sympathy. In one of his first popular successes, the Broadway musical On the Town (1944), he wrote the city’s unofficial anthem, a four-minute pop song that joyously exclaimed the city’s name over and over: “New York, New York!” Underneath those four words was Bernstein’s trademark motive, a four-note ascent that conveyed Bernstein’s boyish enthusiasm and shot up as high as a New York skyscraper. While “New York, New York!” is too terse to capture all of the city’s magnitude and diversity—a feat which Bernstein would attempt over the course of his career, exploring a different side of New York in each of his pieces—it does express the possibility,
wonder, and optimism we still ascribe to New York, expressed in a slang-filled native
tongue that locals could appreciate. Bernstein was at home in New York; any conducting
gig that stole him from New York was a crime on the order of kidnapping.

Besides being a personal and professional home for Bernstein, New York was his
musical home, the perfect emblem of Bernstein’s eclectic musical style. At the
geographic and cultural core of New York were the storied venues of Carnegie Hall, the
Metropolitan Opera House, and Lincoln Center, where institutionalized greats were
canonized and revered at the expense of avant-garde and foreign sounds. Surrounding
this core were less respectable locales with no less exciting sounds: Tin Pan Alley’s pithy
songcraft, Broadway’s codified idiom, Harlem’s jazz and blues, the Latin rhythms oozing
out of the West Side’s tenement neighborhoods. Sometimes these musics met in moments
of harmonious multiculturalism; more often, they would collide in stylistic warfare.

Bernstein’s style had a similar topography: a classical-music core encircled by
popular musics of all different origins and styles. According to Paul B. Laird, when
critics use the word “eclectic” to describe Bernstein’s music they usually have a
pejorative tinge in mind. For both Bernstein and New York, however, eclecticism was not
only a virtue—it was tantamount to existence. In an interview that reads like a
compositional manifesto, Bernstein assents to the claim that “every composer is to some
extent eclectic,” asking aloud: “Who are you if you are not the sum of everything that’s
happened before?” Earlier in the interview, he talks about his favorite composers as if
they were geniuses not in the art of composition but the art of plagiarism:

Take Le Sacre du printemps, which is supposed to be the
work that revolutionized music and changed the world, and
just analyze it page by page, bar by bar. You’ll find that
every bar of it comes from somewhere else. But it has just
been touched by this magic guy. You’ll find roots in Rimsky-Korsakov, and you’ll find sources from Scriabin…note-for-note sources like the sacrificial dance at the end, which is supposed to be the most original thing of all, right? (He sings from the “Danse sacrale.”) It’s from Scriabin’s *Fifth Piano Sonata*. I can show it to you bar by bar. I can show you Balakirev, I can show you the whole thing.\(^6\)

No doubt Bernstein was exaggerating his findings to make a point to his detractors: all composers, even the supposedly original ones, owe at least part of their success to their forebears. The eclecticism that others derided as derivative composing and cultural tokenism was, to Bernstein, music’s fundamental power to incorporate previous styles in expressive combinations. Bernstein was not the first composer to esteem eclecticism in music, but the words are particularly convincing coming out of his mouth—who better to testify to musical diversity than a New Yorker, a native of America’s cultural melting pot? The title of “New York, New York!” had it all wrong: there are not only two “New Yorks”; there are thousands, each with its own background, ethos, and sound.

For all of Bernstein’s avowed eclecticism, his music is filled with the tried-and-true techniques of Western composition: classical forms, counterpoint, standard orchestration, and opera conventions. Most revered of all was Western tonality, which formed the basis of all of his compositions, and which he infamously compared to a universal nonverbal language.\(^7\) Even when Bernstein dabbled in the modernist tricks of his American musical idols Aaron Copland and William Schuman, Laird attests that

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“what shines through most” in Bernstein’s music is “his strong commitment to tonality.”

Still, Bernstein’s admiration for Western music and tonality was mixed with a nearly adolescent impudence and a willingness to bend the rules.

If any one moment encapsulates Bernstein’s peculiar relationship with Western music, it is his major television debut, lecturing on Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony for the progressive-minded educational program *Omnibus* (CBS) on 14 November 1954. Condensing centuries of organicist aesthetic theory into the concise space of a television monologue, Bernstein extols Beethoven’s “ability to find exactly the right notes that had to follow his themes,” his “dedication to perfection, to the principle of inevitability.” He proves this, paradoxically, by rewriting the first movement using Beethoven’s lasting drafts, playing through and evaluating Beethoven’s excised material to demonstrate the importance of revision to the compositional process. In essence, he argues for the piece’s invincibility by prying it apart. His orchestral remodeling must have struck some audiences as heresy—if they were indeed paying attention to him and not the set behind him. Instead of using a projection or poster of Beethoven’s score, Bernstein and his coterie of musicians stand directly on top of a reproduction of the score, blown up to massive proportions that recall the grotesque sets of German expressionist cinema (see fig. 2).

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Figure 2: On the 14 November 1954 telecast of Omnibus (CBS), Bernstein literally lectured on Beethoven’s Fifth

In the most literal way possible, Beethoven had become the groundwork upon which the young Bernstein worked. In the dreamlike abstraction and emptiness of the set, Beethoven’s Fifth was the highly respected artwork and the supposed star of the show—yet Bernstein found nothing troubling in walking all over it, revising indelibly composed passages, and nabbing the spotlight.

In figure 2 we see another defining element of Bernstein’s character, one that he again shares with New York City: the close juxtaposition of high and low culture. The larger-than-life score is a perfect example of the gimmicky immediacy and simplified
communication that characterized the lowbrow medium of television. Yet in his *Omnibus* lecture, Bernstein expropriated that medium in the name of high art.

Examples of Bernstein’s assimilation of high and low culture abound in “New York, New York!” The song’s central motive is catchy and modern enough to be considered a pop hook, but it actually has a discernable Western-music pedigree: the same series of intervals—an open fourth, a major second, and another open fourth—announces Jean’s Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony as a stately horn fanfare (see ex. 2 and 3). The motive’s open, characterless intervals gave Bernstein ample opportunity to lead the song’s melody through twists and turns high and low: he drenches it with bluesy thirds and sevenths, entraps it inside a Stravinsky-esque polyrhythm, and weaves it into a fugal tangle of snaking jazz lines. By the time the song finishes, high art has been disseminated to the masses, low art has been elevated in stature, and the diverse expectations of a New York audience have been answered.

Example 2: The triumphant opening of Jean Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony (mvt. I, mm. 1-2)

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10 Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007), 443.
Example 3: The no-less-triumphant opening to *On the Town*’s “New York, New York!” (mm. 4-10)
In his conjunction of European and American, high and low, white and black and practically everything else, Bernstein brings America’s promises of heterogeneity to fruition. This musical democracy would have been difficult to imagine anywhere outside of New York.

**Into suburbia**

It is surprising to hear, perhaps, that Bernstein’s first depiction of an American home, *Trouble in Tahiti*, takes place not in the familiar neighborhoods of New York but in the foreign land of suburbia. But *Trouble in Tahiti* is an anomaly in more ways than one, differing from all of Bernstein’s output, before and after. A satirical portrait of a disaffected couple in an anonymous suburb, *Trouble in Tahiti* is Bernstein’s only composition that is primarily ironic in tone. The irony marks a substantial difference between the opera and virtually every other Bernstein work, especially when considering how Bernstein’s output prizes accessibility and straightforward communication above all else.\(^\text{11}\) *Trouble in Tahiti* is far from Bernstein’s only attempt at a medium that combines music and drama, but it is the only theater work for which he composed the libretto by himself. And it is his first self-proclaimed opera, where the designation “opera” indicates Bernstein’s appropriation of certain conventions from nineteenth-century opera, including a romantic duet between a male voice and a female voice, and a female mad scene that hearkens back to Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835).

In a typical combination of high and low, Bernstein applies these conventions to the daily minutia of 1950s American suburbia: trips to the gym, excursions to the movies,

commuting on the train. The opera’s first recitative, for example, is a vague one-sided phone conversation between Sam and a client, Mister Partridge. Like a conventional recitative, it hews closely to natural speech rhythms; unlike recitatives, it provides zero plot development. In the highbrow operatic context, the inane phone conversation is equal parts comic and infuriating:

\[
\text{SAM: (tired) Yes? (with sudden charm) Oh, Mister Partridge! (pause) I’m perfectly fine, thank you. (pause) (a slight frown) She’s well. (pause) Yes, exactly what I wanted to speak to you about. (pause) With things as they are, I cannot see how you could ask me again. (pause) Now, Mister Partridge…}
\]

The conversation self-consciously goes on too long. The sense is that Bernstein is thumbing his nose at operatic conventions and at the audience in equal measure.

Why Bernstein so drastically reworked his style for \textit{Trouble in Tahiti} is an issue that may never be resolved. Like all celebrities who want to maintain some degree of privacy, Bernstein constantly suffered from biographical speculation from friends and foes alike. Only recently have scholars stopped bickering about Bernstein’s politics, sexuality, and mental health, and realized that he happened to write some music too.

What makes the case of \textit{Trouble in Tahiti} particularly vexing is the temptation to read the work as an autobiography encoded in music. As Bernstein was writing this portrait of an unhappy married couple, he finally tied the knot, marrying Felicia Cohn Montealegre, a Chilean actress whom he had been dating on and off for several years; inauspiciously, he would complete the opera during their honeymoon.\textsuperscript{12} This correspondence between art and life is noteworthy, because Bernstein almost never worked with scenarios that bore any relation to his personal life, neither in his own compositions nor in others’

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 6.
compositions he conducted. Even more startling connections are buried in the characters’ names. The husband in the opera’s unhappy couple, Sam, has the same name as Bernstein’s father. The wife, Dinah, shares her name with Bernstein’s paternal grandmother; in drafts, the character of Dinah was named Jennie, the name of Bernstein’s mother.

Biographers make the most they can out of these correlations. In her controversial biography of Bernstein, Joan Peyser employs Trouble in Tahiti as the core of an argument that views Bernstein’s career as one protracted Oedipal conflict with his father. Meryle Secrest claims that Bernstein’s naming in Trouble in Tahiti “is a savage indictment and perhaps a cry of outrage from a son who was held up to exacting personal standards while his father felt free to demonstrate all the petty and mean-spirited behavior of which he was capable.” She adds: “Bernstein is questioning not just his parents’ marriage but the whole basis of their lives.” Even Humphrey Burton, Bernstein’s most sympathetic biographer, views the naming as “an extraordinarily vengeful act on Bernstein’s part” that “revealed a streak of cruelty in him.”

These speculative claims are not only shaky arguments—as Barry Seldes protests, “we have no documentation that Bernstein intended Tahiti’s ‘Sam’ to replicate or otherwise stand in for his father”—they also miss the far more interesting and completely uncontroversial fact that, for the first time in his career, Bernstein was exploring a realm outside of his adopted home of New York. Moreover, when Bernstein left New York, he did not enter a world filled with specified autobiographical details, but

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one of generalizations and archetypes that all operagoers would recognize and even relate to. The subject matter of *Trouble in Tahiti*—neighborhoods, households, marriages, and childhoods—is familiar territory for everyone. If *Trouble in Tahiti* is biographical for Bernstein, then it is biographical for us too.

**“The little white dream-house...”: The Prelude**

Some pieces start with a bang. Others start with whimpers. *Trouble in Tahiti* opens with a mutter of complete confusion. That is, it firmly starts on the wrong foot, with the clarinet run that one reviewer correctly characterized as “spine-tingling” (see ex. 4).17 This melody plays an important recurring role, punctuating the end of nearly every scene and resounding prominently during the Trio’s interludes. In all cases, it is a tonally inexplicable melody intruding on an almost entirely tonal opera. Here, inside the G-flat-major world of the Prelude, the jaunty clarinet run starts off with a C-major and a G-major arpeggio—playing, all together, four of the five tones not native to G-flat major. In all, the melody incorporates all twelve tones, with the tonic making a delayed appearance on the down beat of measure 4 as the final, twelfth tone. The central drive of Bernstein’s opera is telescoped in these three measures: *Trouble in Tahiti* is about the circuitous, fraught path to a proper American home; this melody goes through the same difficulties to reach its tonic note.18

Example 4: The clarinet run that opens *Trouble in Tahiti* (Prelude, mm. 1-3). The first three notes spell out a C-major triad; the next three spell out a G-major triad; neither sits comfortably in G-flat major.

A relevant point of comparison is the suave clarinet run that opens George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), a trill into a B-flat scale that transforms into an elegant *glissando* (see ex. 5).

Example 5: The suave clarinet run that opens George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (mm. 1-3)

Gershwin was one of Bernstein’s idols, the forefather of the tradition of American musical theater that Bernstein wished to continue and cultivate. Bernstein was just as enamored with *Rhapsody in Blue*, which he would perform, conduct, and record several times in his career. He must have realized while composing this clarinet run that he had written the negative image of *Rhapsody in Blue*’s opening flourish. Gershwin’s clarinet run epitomizes effortless grace; Bernstein’s opening, in comparison, is disjointed, uninviting, an impediment that the orchestra needs to barge through to start the opera. Everything about the melody that announces *Trouble in Tahiti*—the twelve-tone
collection; the spacious intervallic leaps of fourths, sixths, and ninths; the jagged melodic contour that resembles a mountain range more than the flat plains of suburbia—opposes the diatonic run and enticing glissando of Rhapsody in Blue. Possibly the most important difference between the two clarinet openings stems from Rhapsody in Blue’s association with New York urbanity, which originated with the piece’s 1924 premiere in Manhattan’s Aeolian Hall and was firmly ossified in Woody Allen’s film Manhattan (1979). By writing the exact opposite of Rhapsody in Blue’s urban opening, Bernstein crafts an opening that signifies suburbia, with all of its deficiencies and complications.

Even as the clarinet fades and the Trio starts to croon, the Prelude continues to acknowledge urban life with what Keathley calls “audible reference to the not-suburban.”19 In measures 21-23, for example, the baritone breaks free from the restrained ppp of his radio-commercial voice, ironically exclaiming “Suburbia!” to the tune of On the Town’s “New York, New York!” This expansive motive is met with a sarcastic response in the form of a radio-commercial-style repeat of “Suburbia!” For the repeated “Suburbia!,” Bernstein pancakes his trademark motive, compressing its major second and open fourths to a monotone soprano line and inching chromatic lines in the tenor and baritone (see ex. 6).

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19 Keathley, “Postwar Modernity and the Wife’s Subjectivity,” 225.
Example 6: *On the Town’s* “New York, New York!” motive has migrated to “Suburbia!” (Prelude, mm. 21-23)

The same message underlies the first ironically mobile “Suburbia!” and the second melodically static “Suburbia!” Unlike the liberating New York of Bernstein’s *Fancy Free* and *On the Town*, the suburbs preclude social and personal mobility. For Sam and Dinah, the home inhibits individual desires; even the poor baritone is cut short the moment he sings alone. His lone “Suburbia!” is a prominent exception to one of the Trio’s primary rules: to consistently sing in a homophonic texture. Their rhythmic unity evokes the same sense of utopian community we heard in the “Story of Our Town” cue in Copland’s *Our Town*—perhaps even stronger, since the Trio almost always moves in strict parallel motion, like one force singing three pitches at once. The Trio sticks together even through Bernstein’s shifty metrical changes, as in measures 8-20, a 13-bar phrase that disperses three bars of 3/4 between ten bars of 4/4 (see ex. 7).

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Example 7: An example of the Trio’s homophonic texture and Bernstein’s metrical shiftiness. Note that the soprano and tenor always move in parallel motion; the baritone often follows suit (Prelude, mm. 8-10)

There is a strong discordance between the Trio’s lockstep rhythmic perfection and Bernstein’s metrical imperfection, one that is slyly camouflaged by the Trio’s “breathy and saxy” singing style. That discordance is only one of many: when you tabulate this music’s elements—the homophonic texture that connotes utopian community, the jerky metrical shifts that suggest instability, the menace underlying the Trio’s ppp breathy crooning, the ironized American Dream presented in the libretto—the conflicted conception of home that emerges is a dystopia in which it is impossible to be independent. This dystopia will be entirely confirmed by scene 1, as Junior leaves for school and Sam and Dinah immeadiately and instinctively begin to argue, as if returning to their natural state. Bernstein’s opera has only begun, and the American Dream is nowhere to be found.
Three forms of non-communication: Scene 1

When we finally step inside the little white dream-house in scene 1, Sam and Dinah’s discord immediately dispels any remaining vestiges of the Trio’s utopian portrait. The very first sounds we hear from Sam and Dinah are stereotypical lines of marital bickering, amplified to the highest degree. Apparently, this household is governed by Murphy’s law: anything that can go wrong in a marriage goes spectacularly wrong here. Over breakfast, they “quarrel about anything and everything,” as Peter Gradenwitz aptly puts it.21 The argument covers major family issues, minor squabbles, and everything in between: the importance of attending Junior’s school show, kitchen-table etiquette, who should replace the burnt coffee on the table, Dinah’s erratic behavior at home, the vapidity of Sam’s love of handball, and the radioactive decay of their marriage. When Dinah accuses Sam of infidelity, Sam laughs it off and curtly closes the matter. When Sam decries Dinah’s psychoanalyst as an “out-and-out fake,” Dinah replies that he “should go too.” With that, Sam abruptly leaves for work; neither husband nor wife says goodbye. This protracted argument is punctuated with sincere soliloquies, in which Sam and Dinah each express remorse and a desire for reconciliation. For one tragic stretch, they soliloquize at the same time, oblivious to how much they have in common; this is Bernstein’s sinister twist on a nineteenth-century operatic trope, the beloved couple singing a testament to togetherness. Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, Sam and Dinah never declare their love or their desire to reconcile to one another, which subjects the audience to a tragic dramatic irony. The unremitting conflict between Sam and Dinah avoids resolution; the scene only ends when Sam’s commuter train arrives with a noise loud enough to drown out the couple’s derisive back-and-forth.

21 Gradenwitz, Leonard Bernstein: The Infinite Variety of a Musician, 176.
As the first lines of the scene show, these heavy accusations are light on details:

SAM: How could you say the thing that you did…
DINAH (interrupting): What is it this time?
SAM: In front of the kid!
DINAH (interrupting): You were the first to go up in smoke.
SAM (interrupting): Always it’s my fault.
DINAH: I just meant a joke.
SAM: Pass me the toast.
DINAH: You might have said please.

(pause of silent hostility)

When *Trouble in Tahiti* was first released, Bernstein’s libretto was decried by reviewers as “facile in its satire and banal in its poetic flights,”22 his characters as “stereotypes.”23 From Sam’s very first line, an unexplained indictment of Dinah for saying “that thing” that she did, Sam and Dinah’s words are undeniably vague. Yet that vagueness is one of the libretto’s greatest virtues, for several reasons. First, the open-ended lyrics reiterate the opera’s sense of universality, which first appeared in the Prelude as the Trio positioned the opera’s setting in different suburbs all over America. Moreover, Sam’s initial charge appears to originate from nowhere—there is no clear provocation on Dinah’s part and no justifiable reason for the couple to argue. This is how volatile the marriage is: Sam and Dinah jump at the occasion to fight over anything, even over nothing at all.

The music is no less agitated. For scene 1, Bernstein composed three distinct sections, which he roils into one disorganized mess. The majority of the scene is comprised of a section that I call the “argument music,” in which Dinah and Sam bicker in the diegetic world of the opera using natural speech rhythms. The “argument music” is interrupted by two soliloquies that occur once in the middle of the scene (mm. 43-60) and

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once at the end (mm. 125-42). In the two instances of this section, first Dinah then Sam step outside of the diegetic world of the opera to express themselves with prolonged, songlike melodies. The final section is Sam and Dinah’s duet (mm. 61-70), which, like the soliloquies, seems to take place exclusively inside the characters’ heads, with little effect on the outside world. Bernstein’s omnivorous musical taste is on display throughout: each section has its own musical style, its own narrative function, and its own distinct emotional character. But the scene never devolves into a musical or thematic free-for-all. What the three disparate sections have in common is the idea of non-communication: Sam and Dinah, no matter what they try, can never convey anything meaningful, personal, or sincere. In each section, Bernstein suggests that the crucial fault with this home is the inability for individuals to communicate and thereby commingle into a family.

The “argument music” makes its first appearance at the tumultuous start of the scene, as the comfort of the Prelude’s commercial jingles is replaced by music that features violence, brutality, and asymmetry (see ex. 8).
Example 8: Sam and Dinah’s “argument music” (scene 1, mm. 4-16)

The dominant-seventh-laden jazz of the Prelude has given way to Aeolian modal music, devoid of a single leading tone. Bernstein wittily composes music without harmonic resolution to score a scene without interpersonal or emotional resolution. The emotional nature of this unresolved music is hard to pin down, but the lack of harmonic direction hints at coolness, even repression. But the section does not culminate on a conclusive note of anger, remorse, or guilt; it does not culminate on a conclusive note of anything. In another clever tonal decision, Bernstein modulates from D Aeolian down to C Aeolian halfway through the section (m. 9). Given the pop origins of the opera’s
vernacular music, we might have expected a modulation a whole-tone up, an elevation in musical intensity to correspond to the escalation in the couple’s bickering. The modulation down to C is, shockingly, a settling down, the couple’s repression represented in tonal terms. Besides the transposition down a whole step, the melody and accompaniment remain unchanged by this modulation, resulting in an illusion of movement but no actual change for the conversation or the couple’s feelings. As this section repeats throughout the scene, this unresolved, static music grows more and more oppressive. Neither the listener nor the couple feels they can escape from this music; we are all together imprisoned in the couple’s home.

As in any other passage from Bernstein’s output, we can discern a surprising hodgepodge of musical styles in these thirteen measures. The eighth-note ostinato built of a fifth, a sixth, and a tower of perfect fourths recalls the expansive sonorities that we have examined in Copland’s score to Our Town. Bernstein recasts these famous emblems of physical and geographic distance into emblems of interpersonal distance; the gulf between Sam and Dinah stretches as vast as the American frontier. The vocal melodies, which are derived from tetrachords and pentatonic scales, are propelled by an exotic, ritualistic beat of irregular rhythmic groupings (3+5, sometimes further subdivided 3+2+3) in the accompaniment. Later in the scene, a pronounced polyrhythm of three against four contributes to the primitive sound. It is as if Stravinsky had immigrated to America, settled down, and gone the way of pop music. While there is no direct reference to The Rite of Spring—no opening bassoon solo, no sacrificial dance—it is not a stretch to say that Bernstein views Sam and Dinah’s marriage as a perverse ritual, one on the order of human sacrifice.
The “native folk sounds” at the core of this primitive music are the natural speech rhythms of American vernacular English. Laird considers this attention to natural speech to be as essential to Bernstein’s music as his stylistic eclecticism, claiming that speech “may, in fact, be the single most important influence on Bernstein’s vocal music.”

That love of vernacular rhythms began with Trouble in Tahiti; as Bernstein wrote in a letter in 1951, one of the delightful challenges of composing the opera was “getting Americanese to sound sensible when sung.”

In the “argument music,” the clipped, un-lyrical vocal lines and the constant interruption between Sam and Dinah ground the scene in reality. Speech can be its own sort of home—after all, for native speakers, speech is a familiar, comforting convention, one strongly tied to ideas of place, nationality, community, and family. More simply put, one of the best ways to know that you are home is when the people around you sound the way they should, when their speech sounds normal. The only normal things in Sam and Dinah’s abnormal home, it seems, are the natural rhythms of their bickering.

Bernstein noticeably abandons natural speech rhythms in what Burton calls the scene’s two “lyrical asides,” moments when Dinah and Sam soliloquize the deep emotional despair that is repressed in the squabbling of the “argument music.” In these soliloquies, we move from the reality of the “argument music” into the characters’ heads. Natural speech rhythms would be ill-suited for the lyricism and narrative abstraction of these passages. If anything, the rhythm at the beginning of the “lyrical aside” is an essay in unnaturalness. The two soliloquies are musically identical, and lyrically related as

26 Ibid., 222.
well, so both of them could exemplify the unnaturalness. But Dinah’s soliloquy has the privilege and shock of coming first (see ex. 9).
Example 9: The soliloquy, part 1: the throes of Dinah’s “lyric aside” (mm. 43-53)

Like the music preceding it, Dinah’s outburst is written in 4/4, but the meter is contradicted by a three-beat ostinato in the orchestra. The excursion into triple meter is reinforced by a percussive scrape from the double bass every three beats. At the same time, the accelerating tempo, the newfound attraction to triplets, and the instruments remaining in 4/4 muddy the new meter. Like the Rite’s “Procession of the Oldest-and-Wisest,” this sandwich of different rhythmic layers creates an awesome sound simply by superimposing several metrical patterns. Above the din of the orchestra, Dinah sings in a legato songlike line that contrasts with the clipped speech rhythms of the “argument music.”

A simple way to interpret this metrical turbulence is to claim that Dinah is out of sync with her marriage: she wants to comfortably sing in 4/4 while her marriage marches ahead of her in a brisk 3/4. The same goes for Sam when he sings the same tune with different but equally distraught lyrics later in the scene. A more nuanced interpretation would take into account the complex recipe of emotions contained in Dinah’s lyrics: revulsion (“Oh!! I’m sick of this life!”), shame (“Day after day of the same humiliation!”), feeling neglected and undervalued (“Day after day with no consideration...
of what it means to be a woman!”), and a central current of hopelessness (“Day after
day,” she repeats, conveying an unimaginable feeling—the scene has barely gone on five
minutes and it is practically unwatchable). Like this metrical assailment, Dinah’s
emotional state is comprehensible if taken one part at a time. Taken together, the
emotions cooped up in the little white dream-house combine into one unbearable effect.

What would it take to relieve Dinah’s troubled mix of emotions? Not much, it
turns out: she “needs so little,” simply “A little feeling of warmth, / A little feeling of
home” (mm. 54-60). With these lines, Dinah steps out of the polyrhythmic commotion of
measures 43-53 into a texture that recalls the opening of Barber’s Knoxville: Summer of
1915, which conveyed nostalgia through folksy stepwise melodies, an unembellished
major-key tonality, and pastoral allusions such as droning bass and prominent
woodwinds. Perhaps Dinah is feeling a bit of Barberian nostalgia here—there are hints in
scenes 3 and 4 that the couple’s marriage was better once—but it is equally possible that
Dinah has never known “a little feeling of warmth, a little feeling of home.” The irony
that sours this pristine major-key moment, of course, is the sight of Dinah singing these
earnest lines in her warm, comfortable home. She is literally in her dream-house, and it is
still not good enough (see ex. 10).
In the middle of this chaotic mix of banal breakfast-table conversations and “lyrical asides,” the couple finally sings together in the first of what Leonard Burkat calls the opera’s “self-searching duets.” This oxymoronic phrase is in fact a painfully accurate term for the strange brand of duet shared by Sam and Dinah. In these duets, Sam and Dinah express the same sentiments with the same melodies and same lyrics, all the while remaining entirely self-involved and oblivious to everything the two have in common. The resulting duet can pack many puzzling ironies and narrative contradictions into the space of ten bars.

Musically, this duet is one of the simplest passages in Trouble in Tahiti. The accompaniment has dwindled down to a droning C-sharp, played by the double bass in a

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Example 10: The soliloquy, part 2: “...a little feeling of home.” (mm. 54-60)

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throbbing pulse. Above the drone, Sam and Dinah repeat a melody that begins with two intervallic plummets, a perfect fifth and minor seventh, and ends with a short scalar figure. The melody grinds to a halt on a G-natural, a dissonant diminished-fifth away from the bass. Sam and Dinah sing an octave apart and always one to seven beats off-sync—in this ironic brand of duet, the two singers never quite sing together (see ex. 11).
The simplicity of the music belies what might be the opera’s most emotionally complex moment. Sam and Dinah’s yearning to repair their deteriorating marriage is one of the most admirable intentions expressed in the opera. Yet the language the characters use to verbalize this intent—imperative verbs targeted at one another—suggests that Sam and Dinah cannot escape the accusatory tones we heard without cease in the “argument music.” The melody underneath these imperatives exhibits some ironic word painting: Bernstein pairs Sam and Dinah’s hopeful words with a melody that hopelessly sinks like a stone. Each of the spouses repeats the same melody four times, with occasional rhythmic alterations; the near-exact repetition sounds robotic, devoid of any earnest sentiment. The fact that the two are singing the same melody without interrupting one another for once might be interpreted as an unspoken love or fellowship between the two. But this view is undermined by the perpetually off-sync rhythms, a rhythmic representation of the couple’s fundamental incompatibility. The way that Sam’s melody phases towards Diana’s seems less like the conscious act of a motivated human than the aimless drift of something predetermined or mechanical.
Even the ominous pedal grumbling on the tonic adds to the moment’s full recipe of emotions. Although pedal notes only appear sparingly in this first scene, they are key musical actors in the opera, cropping up when Sam and Dinah are together in scenes 1, 4, and 7. In *Knoxville* and *Our Town*, the droning tonic in the bass was a stand-in for the home, the familiar, grounded spot in tonal space. The opposite associations apply here: instead of security and solidness, the droning bass lines of *Trouble in Tahiti* suggest immobility and inactivity. The uncommunicative home we see on stage is a home, but an utterly undesirable one.

This emotional climax is immediately deflated by the return of the Trio, with music directly copied from the Prelude. The transition is so abrupt that it is as if we changed stations on the radio—from the sober vocal music of Sam and Dinah’s duet to the cheeky commercialism of the Trio. But the contrast is more than musical: in the abrupt transition, Bernstein juxtaposes the domestic ideal presented by the Trio with Sam and Dinah’s marriage at its most vulnerable. It is not the harrowing arguments between husband and wife, not the desperate soliloquies of trapped individuals, not the ironic duet at the scene’s core but these five bars that compose the most devastating moment in scene 1. Listening to the Trio’s commercial for the first time since the Prelude, knowing what we know from observing Sam and Dinah’s marriage in action, we can safely say that the American Dream that the Trio so cheerily advertises has become obsolete.
“Island magic…”: Scenes 2 to 6

Besides their bilious dislike for one another, all that Sam and Dinah seem to share in the “argument music” of scene 1 is the mutual complaint that the obligations of family inhibit their personal desires:

SAM (with mouthing anger): You lead your life, and leave me to mine…
DINAH (interrupting): Oh, but you’re selfish!
SAM: …and we’ll get on fine!
DINAH (interrupting): You have a child, and he should come first.
SAM (interrupting): Can’t you stop nagging!
DINAH: I’m ready to burst!

Scene 1 can be summed up as a depiction of a battleground, but not with Sam and Dinah as the two combatants; as we saw in their “self-searching duet,” the two are fighting on the same side, wittingly or not. The two opponents are the self and the suburbs, an environment that plies the self with everything it needs to fulfill its desires but simultaneously requires those desires to be forfeited in favor of an undefined concept of family. To take the opera’s silliest (and therefore most satirically effective) example, Sam has a fanatical penchant for playing handball—not especially a paragon of masculinity or athletic prowess. In this stretch of dialogue, Sam explains why he cannot attend Junior’s school play that afternoon, with affection for handball that seems to border on addiction:

SAM: I’m due at the gym!
DINAH: To hell with the gym!
SAM: Don’t you see, today’s a special day? Handball tournament and all.
DINAH (interrupting): No, I don’t see why it’s so important!
SAM: Important to me! If I win today, I win the gold cup!
DINAH (nastily): Isn’t that dandy!
SAM: The tournament cup!
DINAH: You and your cup! Your ego is wild!
SAM: Well, it’s important!
DINAH: But think of your child!
SAM: Oh, Junior’s all right.
DINAH: (bitterly) Handball, indeed!
The conflict between the self and the suburbs reaches excruciating highs in scenes 1 and 7, which begin and end the opera, respectively. In these scenes, Sam and Dinah are together at home, where their incompatible desires clash at full force. The five scenes positioned in between, which tell the stories of Sam’s and Dinah’s separate, parallel days, provide temporary relief from the conflict for two reasons. First, Sam and Dinah are no longer cooped up together in the little white dream-house, so they are unable to interfere with one another’s motivations and desires. Second and more important, Sam and Dinah spend their free time in the city, liberated from the tight confines of suburbia. The nameless city of Trouble in Tahiti does not receive that same vibrant, picturesque depiction that Bernstein brings to bear for the New Yorks of On the Town and West Side Story. Nevertheless, the city of Trouble in Tahiti—where individuals are free to be just that, people with no obligation to anyone else—is infinitely more desirable than its suburbs. Bernstein never explicitly offers a solution to the conflict between the self and the suburbs, but the generally leavened tone of these middle five scenes implies that Sam and Dinah are better off as single, carefree big-city-residents than miserable suburbanites.

Trouble in Tahiti and in particular its middle five scenes obey a seeming symmetry. The scenes of Sam and Dinah together at home provide the opera with two tense bookends. Adjacent to each scene at home is a pair of solos, one for Sam, one for Dinah, which Bernstein “cuts” between, employing a narrative trick reminiscent of sensational film editing. Sam’s solo in scene 2, three comically awkward one-sided conversations at the office, is spliced with Dinah’s solo in scene 3, a therapy session that counters Sam’s broad humor with Dinah’s sincere pathos. Bernstein similarly cross-cuts scene 5 and scene 6, transporting us back and forth between Sam’s gym and a hat shop
that Dinah browses after viewing a movie alone. The ridiculous gym aria, Sam’s ode to handball, athletic competition, and self-improvement, is matched with an aria from Dinah that starts as a parody of the stereotypical showstopping Hollywood number but morphs into a somber portrait of Dinah’s dissatisfactions with her real life. In scene 4, the opera’s central axis, Sam and Dinah cross paths on a drizzly city street, which Bernstein depicts with the rainy-day melancholia of Erik Satie’s 1888 *Gymnopédies* (see ex. 12 and 13).

Example 12: The opening of Erik Satie’s *Gymnopédies*, no. 1, familiar to anyone who has heard music played in an elevator (mm. 1-5)

Example 13: Sam and Dinah’s encounter on a drizzly city street is soundtracked by a Bernsteinian *Gymnopédie* (scene 4, mm. 1-8)

Immediately upon seeing one another, Sam and Dinah concoct false lunch plans to avoid spending any time together: Dinah is en route to “lunch with Susie,” while Sam has “a
date with old A.J. / Same old bus’ness lunch.” “Too bad we can’t have lunch together,”
Sam begins to say, but Dinah cuts him off and runs off. Both end up eating “alone in a
crowded restaurant,” catching up “on last week’s magazines.” Though somber, their
encounter in scene 4 is still more palatable than the pyrotechnic arguments of scenes 1
and 7. The key to the scene is the simple aural backdrop of the Gymnopédies, which
outfit the scene with distinctly European sounds. The un-American sonorities,
symbolizing the foreign environment of city life, lull the two into a state of lethargic
complacency.

Quantitatively, the symmetrical arrangement of the opera’s arias gives equal
opportunity to husband and wife: each has two solos and an equally strong presence in
their three scenes together. But as Keathley points out, Sam’s and Dinah’s solos are
qualitative foils.28 As she aptly puts it, Sam’s solos portray a man without a “glimmer of
an interior life”: he flirts with his secretary, unctuously conducts a business deal, sings
the praises of his own handball prowess, and continually demonstrates his disdain for his
home life. The overarching tone of his solos is narcissism bordering on self-deification,
not once tinged with self-awareness or remorse. His aspirations are as vacuous as the
Trio’s advertisements; no wonder, then, that we often find Sam and the Trio in close
proximity, as in the Trio’s ironic paean in scene 2 to Sam, that “marvel of a man” (see ex.
14).

Trio (on off-stage mike) 

(Sam is very pleased with himself.)

Oh, Sam, you're a genius, you marvelous man!

Oh, Sam, you're a genius, you marvelous man!

Oh, Sam, you're a genius, you marvelous man!

Oh, Sam, you're a genius, you marvelous man!

Oh, Sam, you're a genius, you marvelous man!

Oh, Sam, you're a genius, you marvelous man!

Oh, Sam, you're a genius, you marvelous man!
Dinah’s solos are the negative images of her husbands’. As Burkat points out, Sam’s solos chronicle “great satisfactions” and “gym victories” while Dinah’s solos concern her multiple “escapes.” Yet the difference between Sam and Dinah is not really the difference between winning and losing, or optimism and pessimism: it is the difference between monster and human. The brutish Sam proves himself to be entirely self-involved, lacking the empathy and mindfulness that makes Dinah “a thinking, feeling subject who interacts with and is affected by her environment.”

Dinah thinks and feels more in her therapy session in scene 3, for instance, than Sam does in the entire opera. In that scene, she relates a recurring dream with transparently obvious symbolism, requiring little psychological detective-work. In the dream, Dinah is trapped in an inescapable “garden gone to seed,” a stand-in for her marriage. As she recounts the dream, she

30 Keathley, “Postwar Modernity and the Wife’s Subjectivity,” 224.
evinces sincere remorse and a yearning to return her wedding to its former glory, emblemized as a place where “love will teach us / Harmony and grace,” to “a quiet place.” Bernstein would reuse that phrase, “a quiet place,” as the title of the 1983 sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti*. Neither opera reaches calm or quiet; there is no eye to the storm of Sam and Dinah’s marriage.

The best example of Dinah’s singular capacity for emotion is her aria “What a movie!!,” which takes place in a hat shop in the city. It arrives near the end of the opera in scene 6, and immediately after Sam’s laughable gym aria in scene 5. Keathley points out that these pairs of solos always start with Sam’s songs of “vanity and hubris,” setting up Dinah’s solos as the human responses to her husband’s loutish behavior. At first, Keathley seems to have “What a movie!!” all wrong. The aria opens with a recitative of Dinah’s unsparing criticism of *Trouble in Tahiti*, a new film musical she viewed in her time alone. She incredulously hollers: “What drivel! What nonsense! What escapist Technicolor twaddle!!” The aria proper comprises Dinah’s attempts to summarize the film’s plot, which is about as comically convoluted as a Verdi opera. Suffice it to say that it features a handsome, virile American hero inexplicably stranded on a remote island, a scantily-clad tropical princess who immediately falls in lust with him, portentous legends, natives bloodthirsty human sacrifice, tidal waves and volcano eruptions that arrive in mysterious tandem, and the U.S. Navy arriving in a thousand-strong parachute landing to save the day—although it is not exactly clear to Dinah or the audience how the navy arrived nor how their dramatic entrance resolves the film’s plot in any way.

Dinah’s summary takes the form of a strophic song with a stereotypically American verse—a modified blues progression with syncopated melodies, a marching-

31 Ibid., 223.
band-style 2/4, and militaristic horn tattoos—and a stereotypically “Other” verse—Latin, South Asian, and beguine rhythms, shouts of “olé,” pentatonic melodies, flawed English grammar, jungle sounds, and parts for exotic instruments of all different origins. Keathley describes the “Other” verse as a “crazy quilt of signifiers,” but another good description would be a parody of Bernsteinian eclecticism, multiculturalism run rampant. As she sings, Dinah tries on different hats in the store to better illustrate the plot (see ex. 15).

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{\textit{Ex. 15}}

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\begin{quote}
\textit{From here on, she uses the various hats she is trying on to help illustrate the plot.}
\end{quote}

\textit{Recit.}

\textit{There she is in her inch or two of sarong, floating, floating, etc.}

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The more Dinah explains the plot, the less ironic her rendition of the “Other” verse becomes. When her retelling gets to the love song of the film—“Island Magic,” a catchy pentatonic number—she sings entirely wholeheartedly, “emoting fully, dancing, all over the stage” (see ex. 16). Before long, the “American” refrain has entirely disappeared, taking the American Dream along with it. In its place is what we might call the “Tahitian Dream,” a paradise that is not especially better than the American Dream but seems preferable to Dinah solely for its exoticism. Bernstein’s message is clear: the American Dream is not enough. As soon as Dinah has it, she desires something more exotic, gaudy, and racy. A conception of the home based entirely on the achievement of prosperity and success can never completely satisfy. It is just as Bernstein’s stage directions indicate: as soon as Dinah has one hat on, she wants to try on another.
Example 16: The sweeping sentimentality of “Island Magic” (rehearsal number 21)
It seems a typically Bernsteinian paradox that the opera’s catchiest number contains its highest dose of political vitriol. From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, it is too easy to dismiss the opera’s timely satirical edge. But at the time of the opera’s composition, the “traditional family” of 1950s America was still a recent invention, one birthed out of an anxiety-ridden atmosphere of Cold-War conservatism and pervasive intolerance and nursed by an equally strained media. Prejudice against anyone outside of the conservative, white, heterosexual male norm was de facto law; to reactionary political powers like the House Un-American Activities Committee, “all liberationist movements were bracketed together as anti-American, while gay and Jewish people were regarded as suspect a priori.”

Bernstein himself was vulnerable to the paranoid miasma of the times: he had been listed by Life magazine as one of America’s fifty most prominent “ Reds,” blacklisted by television networks and musical institutions, and singled out by the FBI as a dangerous person to watch.

“ What a Movie!!,” though sugar-coated with Bernstein’s trademark melodicism and humor, constituted a bold attack against the politics and culture of the times, tearing at gender inequality, American exceptionalism, and Hollywood inanity in equal measure. In every way, Dinah’s aria is the anomaly of this study. It has no truck whatsoever with the ideas of home we have previously encountered in nineteenth- or twentieth-century music, and it does not find any kindred satirical spirits until the rebellious uprising of rock ’n’ roll later in the decade.

33 Several ideas and the quote found in the first half of this paragraph stem from Keathley, “Postwar Modernity and the Wife’s Subjectivity,” 221.
As expected, the scene ends with disappointment—Technicolor reveries can only last so long. Dinah, blaring “Island Magic” with the Trio behind her, realizes that she needs to hurry home if she is to prepare Sam’s dinner on time. Her American Dream was calling, and Tahiti would have to wait.

“Isn’t it time / That we had a talk?”: Scene 7

The most striking detail about the topography of Trouble in Tahiti is that it ends where it begins: its final scene is a musical and dramatic recapitulation of its first scene. Despite the day’s minor victories and defeats—Sam’s business and handball wins, Dinah’s revelations at the therapist and movie theatre—nothing has changed, the couple is unfazed. The only perceptible difference is that the “mornin’ sun” from the prologue has quit kissing the little white-dream house. Scene 7, the opera’s last, opens with nightfall, as Sam and Dinah return from their days of solitary work and play. They immediately settle back into their earlier bickering, even singing the “argument music” of scene 1, transposed down a perfect fourth. It is as if Sam and Dinah are too exhausted by their long days to argue at their original key and intensity.

The main musical additions to the “argument music” are the contrasting sounds of the Trio’s hummed advertisements underneath Sam and Dinah’s singing. Bernstein never wants us to forget the vast divide between the commercialized ideal of the Trio’s crooning and the troubled reality of Sam and Dinah’s marriage; we saw this in scene 1 when he abruptly cut from Sam and Dinah’s duet to the Trio’s untroubled singing. His technique in scene 7 is more direct: he superimposes the reality directly on top of the ideal, such that the disparity between the two is undeniable. Sam and Dinah’s first
argument in scene 7, for instance, interrupts two of the Trio’s images of marital bliss: “Evenin’ pleasures / And evenin’ shadows / In Ozone Park” and “Telling of intimate matters, / Telling all those little things / That are only meant for / Sharing, smiling, / Confiding, loving.” The close juxtaposition makes the Trio’s ideal seem all but unattainable, Sam and Dinah’s marital strife all but unavoidable (see ex. 17).
Example 17: Sam and Dinah’s argument and the Trio’s commercials overlap (scene 7, mm. 26-36)
The most shocking juxtaposition between reality and ideal is also the greatest musical contrast of the opera. Midway through the scene, Sam and Dinah are simply too exhausted to continue their argument. For the first and only time in the opera, they speak without singing, and without any musical accompaniment. At first, we do not know how to comprehend this unprecedented, un-musical moment. Is this the “quiet place” that Dinah described to her therapist in scene 4? Does the absence of music make it easier for the two to communicate? Or does it hold them back—after all, as we saw in scene 1, Sam and Dinah were their most candidly emotional in their “lyrical asides,” conversing in extensive, songlike melodies. The conversation turns out to be Sam and Dinah’s familiar uncommunicative, confrontational routine, clothed in a new guise (see ex. 18).
We can applaud Sam for his overtures, but his attempt at reconciliation is too little, too late. His gesture of goodwill, performed “almost tenderly,” shows that true emotion is beyond his reach. Dinah, for her part, has already given up on the marriage. Her words, “spoken dully, tonelessly, without moving,” without any melancholy or anguish, might remind us of the just-as-mechanical “self-searching duet” in scene 1. Yet not even these blunt stage directions are as memorable as the unfamiliar sight of fermatas hovering overhead empty measures. It may be the best notation for an uncommunicative relationship yet devised: grand pauses of pure silence.

What is so distinctive about this scene, besides the absence of music, is that it features two of the largest plot points of the opera: the disclosure that neither Sam nor Dinah went to Junior’s school play, and their decision to see “that new musical… something about Tahiti…,” the escapist entertainment that previously educed real passion and desire from Dinah. The casual reference to the musical makes clear that Dinah’s
Tahitian dream-world is about to be invaded by Sam and the reality of suburban life. It is a major intrusion, since the only escape these two have from their distressed marriage is entertainment—or as they later call it in the scene, “the other magic, / The bought-and-paid-for magic, / Waiting on a Super Silver Screen” (mm. 155-165).

This music-less moment marks the emotional nadir of the play, and Bernstein effectively rubs salt in the emotional wounds with the rude and abrupt reintroduction of the Trio. The moment is akin to the move in scene 1 from the “self-searching duet” to the Trio’s “Mornin’ sun” theme, but the contrast is taken to an even greater extreme. Here, the Trio sings of the same old American dream, with a particular emphasis on how the best couples communicate: “Sharing, smiling, / Confiding, loving.” Bernstein emphasizes the juxtaposition between Sam and Dinah’s reality and the Trio’s ideal with extreme dynamics: the Trio, which sang ppp in the Prelude, is asked to sing at a grating fff. The orchestra makes a monolithic sound underneath, filled with pedal tones and open intervals. It is the sound of Sam and Dinah’s marriage: frigid, immobile, and immutable (see ex. 19).
Example 19: The Trio’s advertisements reach a terrible intensity (scene 7, mm. 93-100)

As Sam and Dinah leave for the movies, the Trio sings unaccompanied the first four chords of the “Island Magic” theme, holding out the final chord, a root-position A-major triad. The purity of this simple triad after all of the opera’s marital and musical dissonance feels like a breath of fresh island air. But in the next measure, the orchestra arrives, reinforcing the triad but adding a D# and G to form the jazz-inflected sharp-eleventh dominant-seventh chord that ends the opera (see ex. 20). The five-note chord encapsulates the repressed tension of Trouble in Tahiti: it bundles two unresolved tritones (G-C#, A-D#) into the stability of a major triad, as if binding two incompatible people in holy matrimony.
Toward A Quiet Place

The final chord of Trouble in Tahiti hung in the air, unresolved, for thirty-one years. Over that time, the theme of domestic and marital tension permeated every pore of American culture, emerging in the plays of Arthur Miller and Edward Albee, the novels of John Updike and Philip Roth, and major films such as Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1966), Kramer vs. Kramer (1979), and Ordinary People (1980). While the theme did not resurface in a prominent American opera, it was at the core of the musical Company (1970), the breakthrough work by Bernstein’s once-collaborator, Stephen Sondheim.
More than anyone, television producers pounced on the theme. Television, unlike film or theatre, is a medium most often consumed inside the home, amidst the family; it was naturally suited to address questions of interpersonal tension and marriage. Today, art that exposes the failings of family and marriage has become so common that it induces eye rolls and bored sighs. When it was released in 1952, *Trouble in Tahiti* was a novel development, an acerbic beginning to a major trend in postwar American culture.

Half a century after it premiered, the opera still enjoys a degree of pertinence. While some aspects of *Trouble in Tahiti* are undeniably specific to the 1950s— the radio-commercial Trio, the “dream-house” with the white picket fence, the “escapist Technicolor twaddle!!”— the familial discord and disappointment that the opera highlights have proven to be lasting motifs in American culture. Bernstein proved this much in 1983 when he premiered his long-delayed sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti*, the one-act opera *A Quiet Place*, its libretto co-written by Bernstein and theatre director Stephen Wadsworth. The two operas were meant to be performed one after the other; together, they total the full-length opera that Bernstein aspired to write for the length of his career. Even more than the plotless *Trouble in Tahiti*, *A Quiet Place* defies summary. The opera takes place thirty years after *Trouble in Tahiti*, in the same little white dream-house and the same anonymous suburb. It begins with Dinah’s death by drunk-driving accident; it is strongly suggested that she took her own life. The funeral is an excruciatingly anxious affair, a head-on collision of Sam, resentful and closed-off as ever, with a grown-up Junior, Sam and Dinah’s daughter Dede, Dede’s Canadian husband François, Dinah’s brother Bill and best friend Susie, and Dinah’s doctor and analyst. Dede, Junior, and François stay the night at Sam’s house; in a series of reveries and reminiscences, the four
confront the traumas of the past, family differences, and Dinah’s recent death. The night ends with everyone in their separate rooms, unwilling to cooperate. The next morning, over breakfast and a game of childhood tag, the four strive to tolerate and understand one another, though not without considerable difficulties. After thirty years of tension, the family is beginning to communicate.

Although *A Quiet Place* was billed as a sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti*, it encompasses far more. *Trouble in Tahiti* is simple and selective: it investigates a single day in the life of a single couple, simplifying their lives for satirical effect. *A Quiet Place* features an extensive cast of characters that spans generations, nationalities, ethnicities, and sexualities. Bernstein summed up the distinction between the characters of the two operas in his pre-production notes. The characters of *Trouble in Tahiti* “were cardboard” for “reasons of caricature, irony, satire, etc.” His new opera, “au contraire, goes deeply into each character, plus a good number of new ones.”35 Far from the stereotypes in *Trouble in Tahiti*, the characters of *A Quiet Place* are almost impossibly specific. Junior, for instance, is a homosexual schizophrenic who had an incestuous relationship with Dede and an affair with Dede’s current husband, François. He suffers from a comically exaggerated Oedipal complex and an obsession with rhyming. Both dysfunctions make him an infuriating presence to audience and characters alike.

*A Quiet Place* is musically all-encompassing as well. Its first chord is the last chord of *Trouble in Tahiti*, the sharp-eleventh dominant-seventh chord that had been ringing on and off stage for decades. Its second chord takes the seven remaining tones not present in the first chord and crowds them into a jarring cluster chord (see ex. 21). Unlike the jaunty clarinet line that opened *Trouble in Tahiti*, which contained all twelve tones

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but sounded like an idiomatic jazz run, the opening to *A Quiet Place* sounds legitimately dodecaphonic. *A Quiet Place* leans heavily on late-Romantic sounds—Alex Ross calls the style “Cold War Mahler”\(^{36}\)—but Bernstein often employs twelve-tone sonorities in moments of intense emotional distress or interpersonal discord. These clusters are the perfect harmonic analogue to a drama about confronting all of life, past, present, and future.

Example 21: The opening bars of *A Quiet Place* feature all twelve tones, packaged into two chords (Prologue, mm. 1-3)

What is the role of *Trouble in Tahiti* in this larger piece? After *A Quiet Place* premiered, Bernstein and Wadsworth realized that *A Quiet Place* was unceasingly dour without any sort of lighter touch or reprieve somewhere in the middle. They decided to integrate and rearrange the two one-act operas into one three-act opera, also titled *A Quiet Place*. In the revised opera, *Trouble in Tahiti* plays in full in Act 2, when it is introduced as Sam’s flashback to a happier time. This is a staggering turnaround. In the context of 1950s suburbia, the home in *Trouble in Tahiti* resembled a dystopia, the American dream turned into the American nightmare. Viewed in the 1980s context of *A Quiet Place*, that

\(^{36}\) Ross, “Disquiet.”
home became a nostalgic retreat. Like the same melody played over a new harmony, 

*Trouble in Tahiti* did not change one note, but a new context had transformed the piece into something entirely different. Bernstein’s unsparing satire had become, of all pieces, Barber’s *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. 
Epilogue: “Let’s Play House…”

Pop culture fanatics have a fetish for mythologizing, demythologizing, and remythologizing. One watershed moment in American musical history that has borne decades of mythmaking occurred in 1954, in Memphis, Tennessee. No matter who tells the story, it always starts unassuming yet inspiring, like an origin story a presidential candidate might tell. Our hero, a nineteen-year-old truck driver named Elvis Presley, grew up in abject poverty and passed through high school a pariah, unnoticed and unremarkable. Despite (or because of) his social position, he harbored fairytale-like fantasies of becoming a full-fledged American celebrity like Fred Astaire or Frank Sinatra, multilingual stars that were fluent in singing, dancing, and acting.¹ But even as he pined for Hollywood glitz, he was enthralled with rhythm and blues, a genre of popular music performed by and marketed to African-Americans that was regarded by most whites as the bottom of the popular-music hierarchy.²

On the afternoon of July 5, when he was called into a foundering studio owned by Sun Records to record with two local musicians he had met only the day before, Elvis impressed everyone by rattling off the titles of obscure blues numbers nearly as old as he was. As the session wore on, the trio recorded numerous songs but never coalesced for a marketable, memorable take. For no particular reason, the young singer picked up his guitar and launched into a maniacally upbeat cover of a 1947 blues shouter by Arthur Crudup, “That’s All Right” (see ex. 1), as his back-up musicians and the studio’s head struggled to keep pace.

Example 1: The first page of Arthur Crudup’s 1947 blues number, “That's All Right,” galvanized by Elvis Presley into one of the first ever rock 'n' roll records (mm. 1-15)
As guitarist Scotty Moore explains, the take was practically a gaffe:

Elvis just started singing this song, jumping around and acting the fool, and then Bill picked up his bass, and he started acting the fool, too, and I started playing with them.\(^3\)

According to a vocal contingent of popular-music critics, in that moment of “acting the fool,” the three musicians recorded the world’s first rock ’n’ roll track, without an ounce of preparation or forethought.\(^4\) It was the beginning of everything that followed: within three years, Elvis would become the iconic American celebrity, strutting his way across national television stages, finding himself massively magnified on cinema screens, and reaching unrivaled success in numerous areas of American popular culture.

In retrospect, it is unclear how groundbreaking the moment really was. *Rolling Stone*, the dictatorial mainstream voice of American popular music, called Sun’s studio “the room where rock ’n’ roll—the sound and the phenomenon—was born,” and the moment of composition “a revolutionary act of musical, cultural and racial integration.”\(^5\)

Greil Marcus, in his landmark tome of popular-music criticism, *Mystery Train*, goes even further, coating the scene with a mythic sheen:

> What followed was the heyday of Sun Records and rockabilly music, a moment when boys were men and men were boys, when full-blown legends emerged that still walk the land and the lesser folk simply went along for the ride.\(^6\)

Yet many critics who study early rock ’n’ roll—Marcus’s “lesser folk,” perhaps—have pointed out that much of Elvis’s style, not to mention a good number of his supposedly trademark tunes, was appropriated directly from his favorite African-American rhythm

\(^{3}\) Ibid., 729.
\(^{5}\) Ibid.
\(^{6}\) Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 142.
and blues artists. Elvis himself would agree; in a 1958 interview, he deflated his own monumental significance, claiming that “rock ’n’ roll has been around for many years… It used to be called rhythm and blues.” Even among white musicians, Elvis did not constitute a first: he was preceded by Bill Haley and His Comets, whose giddy 1954 hits “Rock Around the Clock” and “Shake, Rattle and Roll” played a key role in ossifying the new genre’s name.

Who deserves bragging rights as history’s first rock ’n’ roller is an unceasingly contentious issue. But Elvis’s volcanic success, which sent seismic tremors throughout American society, is inarguable. The onset of Elvis and the music he popularized correlate to—and possibly helped cause—a sharp schism in the American home in both life and music. Home now meant one thing to parents and the diametrical opposite to their children. For the older generation, home was what Sam and Dinah had in Trouble in Tahiti: the American dream of upward mobility, a married couple in a pleasant middle-class house, and the copious satisfactions of suburban life. Rock ’n’ roll advocated, of all things, downward mobility. In the words of Richard Crawford, rock ’n’ roll’s cardinal virtues—Independence, disregard for sexual and social mores, flouting of institutions like family, law, and religion—allowed middle- and upper-class youth “to try on a less privileged identity for size” and to get “a taste of feeling rebellious without actually having to rebel.”

Teenagers nationwide who were unsympathetic to their parents’ conception of home discovered a new conception in popular music. For them, home was not a static house or the obligations of family and marriage; that was

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7 Charles Hamm, Yesterdays: Popular Song In America (New York: Norton, 1979), 408.
9 Hamm, Yesterdays, 394.
imprisonment. Instead, home was personal, social, and sexual freedom, emblemized by automobiles, short-lived flings, and acts of rebellion. Though Elvis was not the inventor of rock ’n’ roll’s key tropes, he was their epitome. In his most raucous tracks, he personified what Marcus calls a refusal of “the limits and conventions of his family life, of his community, and ultimately of American life.”

For certain limit- and convention-loving adults of American society, there could be nothing worse. Rock ’n’ roll flew in the face of every single one of their beliefs, both moral and musical. In the press, Elvis and rock ’n’ roll were greeted with a reception that makes the scorn heaped on the *Concord Sonata* seem almost welcoming. A review in *Newsweek* focused on Elvis’s execrable bodily movements, which they decried as “embarrassingly specific.” Only a decade after the end of World War II, *Time* claimed that rock ’n’ roll concerts bore “passing resemblance to Hitler’s mass meetings.” In an often-quoted op-ed in the *New York Times*, the psychiatrist Francis Braceland reached such delirious furor that he mixed his metaphors, calling rock ’n’ roll both a “cannibalistic and tribalistic” practice and “a communicable disease.” Not that the press was the only institution who reviled the new music. In 1956, reverends in Boston and New York preached against Elvis in weekly sermons. The same year, a judge in Florida prepared warrants for his arrest on charges of “impairing the morals of minors.” One disconcerted piano tuner warned his fellows at the annual National Piano Tuners

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11 Marcus, *Mystery Train*, 146-47.
12 Hamm, *Yesterdays*, ibid.
convention that the percussive playing of rock ’n’ roll pianists spelled disaster for the nation’s keyboards.\textsuperscript{14}

On a musical level, rock ’n’ roll must have seemed like a stylistic dumbing-down to an older generation raised on the sophistication of Tin Pan Alley. Gone were the ingenious modulations and melodic chicanery of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers, replaced by insistent formal repetition and a harmonic vocabulary as conservative as “Home! Sweet Home!”\textsuperscript{15} Gone too were Tin Pan Alley’s inimitable lyrics, which employed wordplay, outlandish rhymes, and subtle verbal variations to portray what Crawford calls a “modern style of love” that “blended devotion with evanescence, anxiety, and eroticism.”\textsuperscript{16} Rock ’n’ roll concerned sex, not love, and communicated with blunt entreaties and barely veiled euphemisms. As American-music historian Charles Hamm notes, “rocking” and “rolling” were well-known African-American slang terms for sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{17} The intent of this music could not be more up front.

Despite the widespread contempt rock ’n’ roll endured from adult authorities, and despite the music’s proud disregard of subtlety and sophistication, the music met with unprecedented popularity among younger generations. As Crawford explains, rock ’n’ roll brazenly expressed the key symptoms of postwar teenage angst: “a general feeling of confusion; a lack of adult role models; an appetite for sexual activity but no approved outlet; and a feeling of being out of place and belonging nowhere.”\textsuperscript{18} It might seem strange, even oxymoronic, that a style about “being out of place and belonging nowhere”

\textsuperscript{14} These three incidents are detailed in Hamm, \textit{Yesterdays}, 399.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 396.
\textsuperscript{16} Crawford, \textit{America’s Musical Life}, 672.
\textsuperscript{17} Hamm, \textit{Yesterdays}, 396.
\textsuperscript{18} Crawford, \textit{America’s Musical Life}, 718.
could be a symbolic home for so many teenagers. But, as American-studies scholar Glenn Altschuler reminds us, rock ‘n’ roll “could examine and contest the meanings adults ascribed”; one such meaning the music strongly contested was the idea that home is static, stationary.¹⁹ Like Jack Kerouac’s decade-defining novel On the Road (1957), rock ‘n’ roll suggested that home was literally in transit. It existed not in houses and suburban neighborhoods but in reckless car rides, train getaways, and roughish lives on the lam. It featured a cast of outlaws, convicts, runaways, and rebels; unless they were holed up in prison—like Elvis in his third film, Jailhouse Rock (1957)—they were on the move.

In Elvis’s first records, you can hear locomotion hardwired into the music. The connection is most explicit in “Mystery Train” (1955), a cover of the Carter Family’s “Worried Man Blues.” Elvis, in his trademark hiccupping declamation, sings in vague terms about a train ride, never elucidating where he is heading or why he is leaving.

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Train I riide,
Sixteen
Coaches long
Train I riide,
Sixteen
Coaches long
Well, that long black train
Carry my baby and gone.²⁰
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Underneath is the insistent harmonic repetition that lovers of Tin Pan Alley songcraft found so unlistenable. In this context, the chugging repetition mimics the dynamism of a freight train, its slight swing beat and syncopation giving the impression of a rickety, bumpy ride. The song is founded upon the easily repeatable twelve-bar blues, a felicitous form for representing a long train journey. As Wilfred Mellers points out, the twelve-bar blues

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¹⁹ Altschuler, All Shook Up, 8.
²⁰ Transcription from Marcus, Mystery Train, 171. His unconventional lineation gives a remarkably good impression of Elvis’s vocal delivery.
blues “has no sense of beginning, middle or end.” It “does not end, it merely tails off,” he writes. 21 That is how all of Elvis’s early rock ’n’ roll records conclude: like trains cresting the horizon.

The same chugging rhythms crop up in “Baby, Let’s Play House” (1955), a cover of Arthur Gunter’s blues of the same name. Here, Elvis ventures to defy almost every conception of the home examined in this study. He takes the house—a near-sacred symbol of the home that Ives, Copland, and Barber dressed with hymns and folk tunes—and transmutes it into a bawdy euphemism. Amidst lascivious syncopation and what Marcus calls “a wild crash of hiccups, gulps, and baby-baby-babys,” Elvis solicits his object of desire to “play house” with him, chorus after chorus. 22 Most of the song finds Elvis at his most overtly sexual and profane; the infamous final verse features early rock ’n’ roll at its most horrifying.

I’d rather see you dead, little girl,  
Than to be with another man.

Shortly after, Elvis chortles through the final chorus. As Marcus puts it, it is “as if the venom he’d put into those words struck him at once as ludicrous, and maybe a little frightening.” 23

All in all, “Baby, Let’s Play House” is the polar opposite of “Home! Sweet Home!” and the nineteenth-century home song: where the heart of that venerable

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23 Ibid, 161. These lines were favorites of John Lennon, who inserted them in “Run for You Life,” off the Beatles’ 1965 album *Rubber Soul*, another terrific (albeit not American) example of rock music defying traditional conceptions of family, romance, and the home. In what Mellers calls the album’s “anti-girl” songs, the Beatles recount tales of disaffection, individualism, and romantic incompatibility, all the while dropping decipherable innuendos and cavalier references to acts of violence and arson. What distinguishes the four Liverpudlians from the King is their characteristic blend of tunefulsness and wit, which makes the repulsive moments in their music unnervingly palatable. See Mellers, *Twilight of the Gods* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1975), 58-61.
tradition was nostalgic retrospection, the monstrous drive of Elvis’s song is present-day satisfaction. It turns the home inside out: all of a sudden, the home is mobile, egocentric, erotic, ironic, rough, desacralized, and threatening. Put in those terms, rock ’n’ roll sounds practically psychotic. To adults who associated the home with Coplandesque utopianism or Barberian nostalgia, rock ’n’ roll seemed to literally drive the kids crazy.

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If we take an all-encompassing look at American music in the twentieth century, we might classify Elvis as one of America’s most prominent “mobile musicians,” those classical and popular musicians who only felt at home in America when they were traveling through it. In this company, Elvis is not a revolutionary figure. He is one of many, side by side bluesmen like Robert Johnson; locomotive-aficionado Duke Ellington; soul singers like Nina Simone and Sam Cooke; the hobo composer Harry Partch; wandering folkies like Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan; born-to-run rockers like Bruce Springsteen; the hippie-by-day, minimalist-by-night Terry Riley; and even Steve Reich and Philip Glass, two New Yorkers whose music seems to pulse to the rhythm of cross-country highway rides. (Two of the most telling biographical facts about Reich and Glass are that they both worked as cab drivers, and that they formed a company together called Chelsea Light Moving.)

The mobile musicians left home for countless reasons. Some sought to escape persecution, others to stave off boredom. Some were in pursuit of distinctly American dreams, while others wanted to avoid America altogether. Most are marginalized figures; added together, they create a supermajority characterized by the inability to sit still and the restive urge to write music about movement, journey, technology, and transportation. Their story is the flipside to the story traced by Ives,

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24 Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007), 549.
Copland, Barber, and Bernstein—just like those composers, the mobile musicians wanted to understand life in America, but they would do it on the go, at a distance, and on their own terms. They are valuable reminders that there is always a multiplicity of “homes” in American music, often in unexpected places, perhaps in a mystery train “comin’ ‘round, ‘round the bend.”

Over time, some outsiders work their way in. Robert Johnson, ostracized in his time for supposedly selling his soul to the devil, is today regarded as a saint-like figure in blues, folk, rock, and early heavy metal.25 Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land,” a song originally about unionization and the abolition of private property, is taught to kindergarteners nationwide.26 And Elvis’s songs—including “That’s All Right,” “Mystery Train,” the freakish “Baby, Let’s Play House”—have become, of all things, American classics, as central to the history of twentieth-century music as “Home! Sweet Home!” was to nineteenth-century music. For people of a certain generation, Elvis’s music evokes nostalgia the same way that Protestant hymns, Stephen Foster tunes, and “Home! Sweet Home!” did for Charles Ives. In a roundabout, ironic twist, music about escaping, defying, and questioning the American home ends up entering the home, even becoming it.

Over the course of this study, I have examined home in its various guises: as a house, a marriage, a family, a community, a figment of the imagination, a memory, a utopia, an irresolvable problem. But it is also important to remember that home often means music itself. Every musician mentioned in this study—from the mobile musicians to our four stationary composers—was confident that music was a viable medium for

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25 Marcus, Mystery Train, 19-35.
26 Mark Allan Jackson, Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 27, 34, and 244.
exploring the American home. They could *hear home*: it was in the tunes they loved, in the hymns and folk songs they sang in their youth, possibly in their very own music.

Many did not live to see their musical depictions entering the ears and minds of listeners and becoming the next generation’s defining sounds of the American home. Listening back on the twentieth century, we can hear a remarkable fact ringing true: while searching for the American home, these musicians ended up building it.
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