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I, Anthony Zoeller, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:
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“Song of Myself”: Themes of Identity and Context in Selected Early Twentieth-century Settings of Walt Whitman

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“Song of Myself”: Themes of Identity and Context in Selected Early Twentieth-century Settings of Walt Whitman

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DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

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by

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Composers have set the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819–1892) more than five hundred times in the century since his death—the most for an American poet. For many, Whitman is the quintessential representative of the United States. This document will examine the ascendancy of Whitman as it relates to vocal art music from the first half of the twentieth century and will focus on the context in which composers have turned to him for inspiration. Composers from various nations and communities also seem to find something in Whitman that speaks to them and their individual circumstance, be it comfort in war and loss, racial integrity, sexual orientation, love of man and nature, or patriotism. Specific pieces will be presented as representational examples of these various themes. Concepts of self-identity and national identity will be addressed, and the particular circumstances of composition will be presented in order to show how Whitman, who during his lifetime was largely dismissed by the public and the academy, became known as America’s Bard.
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My love affair with the poetry of Walt Whitman has culminated in this study. First and foremost, I must express gratitude for his poetry, which has inspired me throughout my adult life.

My advisor, Dr. Bruce McClung, has provided me a strong, guiding hand and a shining example of what a scholar, teacher, and advisor should be. From his two-quarter survey course on American music to his help in advising my lecture recital on Arthur Farwell’s Emily Dickinson songs and his months-long work on this document, Dr. McClung has opened my eyes to the beauty and importance of American art music. What was once a passing interest of mine has become one of the central concerns of my academic and performing life.

At the beginning of this process, I unsuccessfully attempted to locate John Wannamaker’s extensive collection of Whitman scores compiled in the late 1960s and early 1970s and deposited at the Drake University Library in Des Moines, Iowa. I appreciate the help I received in the search from Dr. Wannamaker’s widow and his daughter, and the extensive support I received from the staff at Drake, especially Mark Stumme, the reference librarian.

Glendower Jones at Classical Vocal Reprints has shared with me a wealth of expertise in the field of American song as well as many vocal scores over the years. He takes great care to preserve and reprint literally hundreds of rare and out-of-print music, providing an invaluable asset to the singing community and scholars alike.

My interest in musical settings of Walt Whitman began in college with the purchase of Thomas Hampson’s recording To the Soul, which exposed me to the clarity and beauty of Whitman’s poetry set to music for solo voice and piano. My performances of Vaughan Williams’s A Sea Symphony with Robert Porco and the May Festival Chorus during my doctoral
studies solidified my decision to research this topic further. As a member of the Chorus, I benefited greatly from Mr. Porco’s enthusiasm for Whitman and his skilled guidance through this majestic piece.

Professor Kenneth Griffiths has been a special guide in my musical life ever since we met at the Tanglewood Music Center when I was a beginning singer. It was a great honor to guest-teach two sessions of his course in American art song while preparing this document, and it has been an honor to work with him as musical coach. I look forward to continuing our collaboration in the future.

I thank Professor Stanley Corkin for reading this document from the perspective of a non-musician. Your insight into the world of Whitman has been most helpful.

I would like to express gratitude to my fellow classmates who have encouraged me throughout this process, especially Kimberly Gelbwasser and Jenny Cruz, and to my voice teacher in Cincinnati, Tom Baresel, for his continued support of my vocal and academic work.

Last, I need to give deepest thanks to my parents and my family for their support throughout my many years in school. I know that what I do is confusing and does not always make the most sense, but I am grateful for a loving support system that is there for me despite the confusion. It makes no more sense now than it ever did.
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Study

In his magnum opus *Leaves of Grass*, American poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892) declared to the world an audacious manifesto of his bold and daring democratic vision. This collection of poems has provided the most musical settings of any American poet in history—more than five hundred musical compositions from 1880 to the present.1 These settings come in a variety of forms, from solo songs for voice and piano, to pieces for unaccompanied chorus to large-scale compositions for soloists, chorus and orchestra. They were composed in the United States and various European countries, especially in Great Britain and Germany. The vast Whitman repertoire grows each year.

The purpose of this document is neither to survey the entire collection nor to categorize the musical settings in any comprehensive way. Rather, this is an investigation into the context of the ascendancy of Whitman as the favorite poet among American composers in the first half of the twentieth century. The investigation begins with the attraction of British composers to Whitman’s sea poems and the poems of loss and war around the turn of the twentieth century as a prelude to the poet’s later popularity among American composers. I address the context of racial identity among black composers and literati in relation to Whitman’s “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors,” as well as themes of homoerotic love found in the collections *Children of Adam* and *Calamus*. I give considerable attention to Whitman’s status as forebear of modernism in poetry and music, especially as it relates to American composers looking to establish a unique musical identity in the aftermath of World War I. Also important is the use of Whitman’s verse to invoke

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patriotism during World War II on the part of American composers as well as newly arrived German emigrant composers. Specific pieces are examined within the milieu of the composer and within the context of world events. I hope that this document shows that Whitman’s ability to speak so clearly to the lives of composers as well as to the larger community of man is the chief reason for his primacy among American poets across generations.

Literture Review

The authoritative document on Whitman’s musical settings is John Wannamaker’s 1972 dissertation, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Study of Theme, Structure, and Prosody.”2 This comprehensive 635-page study surveys in wide scope the nearly four hundred musical settings available to the author, categorizes the chosen poems by theme, and discusses in detail which themes are most popular and how composers chose to interpret Whitman’s verse. A discussion of differences between Wannamaker’s study and this document is given in the methodology section below.

The literature available on the poetry of Whitman is extensive, as is that of certain composers, such as Ives and Vaughan Williams. Therefore, while I present much of the contemporary Whitman literature, I focus my study on the documents pertaining to Whitman’s posthumous acceptance and influence in Great Britain, Germany, and the United States between approximately 1900 and 1945, and how individual composers in various generations reacted to the poet based on their individual perspective. In addition to Wannamaker’s dissertation, Michael Hovland’s Musical Settings of American Poetry: A Bibliography provides a listing of

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which poems were set by which composers, and Judith Carman’s reference book *Art Song in the United States* gives a cross-referenced listing of published songs and recordings.³ Autobiographical accounts from composer Ernst Bacon (*Words on Music*) provide insight into the process of selecting a text and creating a meaningful musical interpretation.⁴ Quite a number of publications address the relationship between Whitman and modernism in music and poetry, notably Gay Wilson Allen’s *The New Walt Whitman Handbook*, a number of articles from the journal *American Literature*, and William Everdell’s book, *The First Moderns*.⁵ The choral works of William Schuman, Roy Harris, and Howard Hanson are analyzed musically and poetically in Lou Stem Mize’s dissertation “A Study of Selected Choral Settings of Walt Whitman Poems.”⁶ My document addresses questions of national, racial, and sexual identity to a full extent, as these topics have been addressed in biographies and journal articles concerning Harry T. Burleigh, Samuel Taylor-Coleridge, Marc Blitzstein, and Roy Harris.⁷ Similarly, the question of Whitman’s role in racial, sexual and American national identity is explored in works by H. G. Cocks (*Nameless Offenses: Homosexual Desire in the Nineteenth Century*), David

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Noble (*Death of a Nation*), and Barbara Zuck (*A History of Musical Americanism*). Finally, American patriotism from the perspective of German artists and composers in World War II is detailed in Reinhold Brinkmann’s collection *Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States* and several articles from Kim H. Kowalke that address the American experiences of Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill.

Methodology

In order to distinguish this document from the comprehensive work of John Wannamaker, I will present a selected chronology of Whitman settings that focuses on issues of circumstance and identity from the perspective of the composer living and working within a larger societal context as opposed to Wannamaker’s study of poetic themes and prosody. To this end, I present representative pieces from specific composers that reflect their Zeitgeist. For instance, British composers composed many Whitman settings of war and loss at the turn of the century. I consider these settings in the context of Britain’s Boer Wars on the African continent. Furthermore, I present evidence to argue that the call to battle in World War I and II fueled Whitman’s great popularity, and that composers from Great Britain, Germany, and the United States set many of the same poems.

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My primary interest is to provide a Whitman link from generation to generation even as the aesthetic and political goals change over the course of time. For instance, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the black British composer who set the poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” as a solo song in the aftermath of the Boer Wars, also composed an instrumental piece entitled “Ethiopia Saluting the Colours,” which Coleridge-Taylor’s American colleague Harry T. Burleigh composed as a song in 1915 more as an expression of racial identity than a call to arms.

The specific themes I consider are as follows: poems of the sea in the work of British composers Ralph Vaughan Williams (\textit{A Sea Symphony}) and Frederick Delius (\textit{Sea Drift}); racial identity among black composers (Coleridge-Taylor and Burleigh); homosexual desire and ecstatic love (early songs of Marc Blitzstein and Delius’s \textit{Idyll}); break from oppression/tyranny and growth of American identity post-WWI (the influence of Whitman’s democratic vision on the music of Ruth Crawford,\textsuperscript{10} Ives’s song “Walt Whitman,” and Ruggles’s works \textit{Vox clamans in deserto} and \textit{Portals}); American patriotism (Howard Hanson’s \textit{Drum Taps}, William Schuman’s \textit{A Free Song}, and Roy Harris’s \textit{Symphony for Voices, Walt Whitman Suite}, and “Song for Occupations”); war songs (songs of Charles Wood); and wartime songs as expressions of naturalized identity (Weill’s \textit{Four Whitman Songs} and Paul Hindemith’s \textit{When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d}). In addition to these major themes, I discuss the short, romantic songs of Ernst Bacon from the late 1920s. Bacon was among the first Americans to set a large number of poems by Whitman for solo voice and piano. Through the exploration of these various themes from decade to decade and nation to nation, this study presents a multi-faceted view of Whitman’s influence on composers throughout the first half of the twentieth century. A brief

\textsuperscript{10} Ruth Crawford is often referred to by her married name, Ruth Crawford Seeger. However, as I discuss only her work and ideas prior to her marriage to Charles Seeger in 1932, I use her maiden name throughout.
Epilogue highlights the major contributions to the collection of Whitman settings in the second half of the century.
CHAPTER ONE
Walt Whitman and British Vocal Music

The history of musical settings of Walt Whitman’s poetry begins with the opening of London’s Royal College of Music (RCM) in 1883. Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), a founding member of the faculty, drew inspiration from the poetry of the great nineteenth-century American poet. Stanford influenced his many students at the College, which played an important role in the development of Britain’s musical renascence. Many of these students, including Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Charles Wood, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, along with Stanford himself, created the first significant repertory of musical settings of Whitman. They take the form of either large-scale choral-symphonic works, such as those of Stanford and Vaughan Williams, or intimate settings for solo voice and piano, most notably those of Wood. Lawrence Kramer writes, “There is no tradition of nineteenth-century Whitman settings, despite the steady development of an international readership for his poetry.”1 Although American Frederic L. Ritter composed the first musical setting of Whitman in 1880, and Stanford composed his Elegiac Ode (for baritone and soprano solos, chorus, and orchestra) in 1884, the first sustained interest in his work dates from around the turn of the century in London.

In the New Walt Whitman Handbook, Gay Wilson Allen writes, “In beginning a survey of Whitman’s reception, reputation, and influence in foreign countries, we inevitably start with the British Isles, where he was first appreciated and first recognized as a major poet.”2 He continues, “The first edition of Leaves of Grass reached the British several months after its

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appearance in America, and that by the 1860s Whitman had many prominent admirers there.” 3
Among those admirers, William Michael Rossetti, brother of poets Dante Gabriel and Christina
Rossetti, edited *Leaves of Grass* for *Poems by Walt Whitman* in 1868 and, with the reluctant
permission of the poet, removed many of the poems deemed to be objectionable to British
tastes. 4 In 1886 Ernest Rhys edited a new selection of *Leaves of Grass* for the British audience,
and Allen claims, “The complete work was still too strong for British tastes, despite the fact that
the book was far more widely appreciated in England than in America.” 5 To wit, Rossetti’s 1868
dition influenced literati even in the United States, where as late as 1877 the assistant editor of
the leading publication of American literary thought, the *Atlantic Monthly*, remarked: “It is a
great pity his works are not really published, and I have been wondering, long, how to get them.
I have nothing but Rossetti’s edition. Is there no way of obtaining them?” 6

The acceptance of Whitman in Britain as a major poet and the simultaneous
establishment of the RCM as the leading British center for compositional training combined with
Stanford’s enthusiasm for Whitman’s verse created a fertile environment for many Whitman
settings, especially from 1897 until the mid-1930s. In addition to Stanford and his students,
Frederick Delius, who stood quite apart from the British conservatory system and the influence
of Stanford, also contributed major settings of Whitman during this time.

The years 1897–1903 constitute a key turning point in British cultural, political, and
artistic history. In South Africa, the Second Boer War (1899–1902) claimed many lives and

3 Ibid., 10.
University Press, 2007), 108.
6 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: M. Kennerly, 1914), 1:17, quoted in Portia
exacted a great financial toll on the British nation. In 1901 Queen Victoria died after more than sixty years on the throne, and the ascendancy of her son, Edward VII, signaled the beginning of a new and modern century less dominated by the social mores of the Victorian era. In music, many of the great vocal pieces of the renascence of British music premiered during these years: Elgar’s song cycle *Sea Pictures* (1899) and his oratorio *Dream of Gerontius* (1900), Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s oratorio trilogy *Song of Hiawatha* (1898–1900), and Ralph Vaughan Williams’s popular song “Linden Lea” (1901). Musical settings of Whitman also played a vital role during these years. Jack Sullivan writes, “What Whitman represented to the British seemed to be nothing quite so subtle, but simply liberation from inhibition and convention.”

In addition to Stanford’s *Elegiac Ode*, the Whitman songs of Charles Wood, a fellow professor at the RCM and former student of Stanford’s, positioned the poet as a major source of inspiration for turn-of-the-century British composers. Byron Adams suggests: “Charles Wood approached Whitman with greater insight. His songs...are in general more forceful and individual than Stanford’s efforts” and that in the midst of the impending war in Africa, Wood “established Whitman as the ‘war poet’ for a generation of composers who live in a period of growing conflict and who lacked a relevant tradition of war poetry.” Adams further writes, “Stanford and Wood influenced the younger generation of English composers by selecting a canon of acceptable Whitman texts.” Just as Rosetti’s poetic editions of Whitman provided a sort of “acceptable” Whitman for the British reading public, Stanford and Wood provided the same in music. The poems set by these two composers have, in fact, become some of the most popular among both American and British composers. In his dissertation on vocal settings of...
Whitman, John Wannamaker shows that only fourteen poems take up close to half of the four hundred settings examined in his study.9 Of these, Wood and Stanford composed settings of three of the seven most popular ones (“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” “O Captain! My Captain!,” and “Darest Thou Now, O Soul.”). Stanford’s use of baritone and soprano solo voices in his *Elegiac Ode* also became the standard vocal scoring for many large-scale Whitman settings. The tenor voice, beloved by Whitman himself, is conspicuously absent in the Whitman oratorio settings in the first half of the twentieth century.10

By 1903 British composers had used Whitman to memorialize the dead (as in Stanford’s *Elegiac Ode*) and to reflect on life in times of war (the solo songs of Charles Wood, especially “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” “O Captain! My Captain!,” and “Ethiopia Saluting the Colours”). That year, coincidentally, marked the beginning of a life-long relationship between Whitman’s verse and two of the greatest (and most different from one another) British composers of the early twentieth century: Vaughan Williams and Delius.

Vaughan Williams had been born in Gloucestershire in 1872, although he spent most of his life in London. He studied music for two years at the RCM, and three years at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated with degrees in music (1894) and history (1895), before returning to the RCM for another year or so. During this time his teachers were Parry, Stanford, and Wood.11 Whitman influenced Vaughan Williams in many ways—the composer carried *Leaves of Grass* in his pocket during active duty in World War I and produced many Whitman-based works over a period of thirty years.

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One of the primary themes of Whitman’s poetry that influenced Vaughan Williams is the infinite or cosmic sea. Whitman had been born on Long Island and lived in New York City, and thus lived in close proximity to the water throughout most of his life. Many of his poems are specifically about the beach or the ocean, such as “On the Beach at Night Alone,” “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” “Passage to India,” and “Song for All Seas, All Ships.” This theme naturally appealed to many British composers, who saw the vast expanse of the sea as metaphor for the possibilities of the new century and the post-Victorian age of their island nation. Sea imagery is not, of course, limited to Whitman, as Elgar composed his own song cycle, Sea Pictures, in 1899 on five poems by different authors (none of them Whitman). Whitman’s poems of the sea, however, provided British composers with a new perspective — as Jack Sullivan writes, “Whitman’s celebration of free speech, free love, and free exchange among normally hostile nations was seen as a blow against Victorian prudery, jingoism, and repressiveness.”

In contrast to the war poems and elegiac poems of the Second Boer War, Vaughan Williams turned to poems of hope and unity in the new century. He composed his Symphony No. 1, A Sea Symphony, between 1903 and 1909, during which time (in 1908) he studied orchestration with Ravel. Vaughan Williams presents themes in this work that are large in scale and full of hope and vigor. In four movements for chorus and soloists, A Sea Symphony draws its texts from five Whitman poems: “On the Beach at Night Alone,” “After the Sea-Ship,” “Song for All Seas, All Ships,” “Passage to India,” and “Song of the Exposition.” Of these poems, the first three are found in the section of Leaves of Grass entitled “Sea Drift,” and Vaughan Williams set them almost in their entirety. He also selected passages from the latter two poems, 

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12 Sullivan, New World Symphonies, 101.
not found in “Sea Drift,” but taken from their own separate poetic sections, entitled “Passage to India” and “Song of the Exposition,” respectively.

An issue that runs throughout the Whitman catalog of musical compositions is the composer’s choice of what to set to music and what to omit.\(^{13}\) Some of the greatest poems found in *Leaves of Grass* are quite long, and a complete setting of a poem such as “Song of Myself” or “Salut au Monde!” might be impractical for a composer to set. With his *Elegiac Ode*, Stanford instituted a standard practice of simply choosing part of a poem to set, as the *Ode* is a sub-section of the poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Many composers followed suit, and in *A Sea Symphony*, Vaughan Williams chose to set only one of the five poems in its entirety: “After the Sea-Ship,” which constitutes the third movement for chorus and orchestra. In addition to setting only certain sections of a poem, Vaughan Williams regularly altered the poetry itself, usually by omission or repetition of words or entire passages in order to present the narrative he envisioned. Byron Adams writes, “As Vaughan Williams felt that he had the right to cut all parts of a text that did not consort with his aesthetic purpose, he did not hesitate to discard erotically charged passages from any poem that he was setting to music.”\(^{14}\) In 1947 A. V. Butcher glibly describes Vaughan Williams’s treatment of Whitman thus: “What he has omitted are usually the ugly bits” and “One might almost say that on occasions like this V. W. writes better Whitman than Whitman himself.”\(^{15}\) Vaughan Williams regularly altered Whitman’s poems, such as the omission of the line “Ah more than any priest O soul we too

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\(^{13}\) Throughout this study, I use the term “catalog” to describe the entire collection of Whitman settings. As part of his comprehensive study of these settings, John Wannamaker compiled some four hundred scores of Whitman settings, which, although once held at the Drake University library in Des Moines, Iowa, have since been lost. Both Wannamaker (1972) and Michael Hovland (1986) provide thorough bibliographies of Whitman’s musical settings.

\(^{14}\) Adams, “‘No Armpits, Please, We’re British,’” 34.

believe in God” from his setting of the eighth section of “Passage to India” in *A Sea Symphony*, or in his omission of the long lists for which Whitman is so well-known, where

All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different, or in different worlds,  
All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the brutes,  
All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations, languages,  
All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe, or any globe.

becomes instead

All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so different,  
All nations, all identities that have existed or may exist.16

This practice of selecting and omitting certain texts from Whitman provides the foundation for Adams’s assertion that “these composers were highly selective, embracing only certain aspects of the American poet’s work while ignoring others.”17 For British composers, including Vaughan Williams, and many later composers from other countries, the vastness of ideas found in *Leaves of Grass* provided ample opportunity for choice and for self-expression on the part of the composer who chose which poems and which parts of those poems to set.

As Vaughan Williams began work on his *Sea Symphony* in 1903 and continued to revise and edit the piece for the next six years, Delius also began work on his own large-scale piece for baritone soloist, chorus, and orchestra based on the poetry of Whitman, entitled *Sea Drift*. Unlike Vaughan Williams, however, Delius worked quickly on the score and completed it in 1904. His wife, Jelka, abridged the poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” for her husband to set. She, however, did not alter the part of the poem set by Delius, as would Vaughan

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16 This passage is the specific context in which Butcher offers his thoughts on Vaughan Williams writing “better Whitman than Whitman.”

17 Adams, “‘No Armpits, Please, We’re British,’” 25.
Williams in his *Sea Symphony*, but rather simply omitted the introductory and closing portions, and presented only the central narrative of the poem.\(^{18}\)

Delius was not a part of the lineage of Stanford and Wood at the RCM, nor was he even a longtime resident of London. Born into a musical family in Bradford, England in 1862, Delius had been an apprentice in the wool trade—the family business—in France, Germany, and Sweden before his experience with Whitman’s America came firsthand in 1884, when his father allowed him to move to northern Florida to manage an orange grove near Jacksonville. Two years later, Delius returned to Europe to pursue a formal musical education in Leipzig and in 1888, he moved to France where he spent most of his adult life and where he composed most of his Whitman settings.\(^{19}\) Delius had a great affinity for Whitman, as Sullivan writes, “The most original art to emerge from the Whitman renaissance in England was the music of Frederick Delius” whose “musical style blended with Whitman’s prosody in ways that seem uncannily organic, as if Delius’s sound and Whitman’s poems were made for each other.”\(^{20}\) *Sea Drift* was Delius’s first of many settings of Whitman’s poetry. In his essay on the genesis of the *Sea Symphony*, Stephen Town illustrates the influence of Delius’s already-finished work on Vaughan Williams’s compositional process to great effect, even presenting musical examples of striking similarity between the two pieces. Although Vaughan Williams often expressed a disdain for Delius’s music, it influenced Vaughan Williams considerably.\(^{21}\) *A Sea Symphony* and *Sea Drift* were the first of many Whitman settings Vaughan Williams and Delius composed from the first

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decade of the twentieth century until the 1930s. In later works, both composers turned their focus away from the imagery of the sea and walked an individual path with Whitman.

During the period of *A Sea Symphony*, Vaughan Williams also composed a piece for chorus and orchestra entitled *Toward the Unknown Region* (1907), a complete and unaltered setting of the poem “Darest Thou Now, O Soul,” which Vaughan Williams’s teacher, Charles Wood, had set as a solo song in 1891. Whitman makes no explicit reference to the sea in this poem, but establishes the primary theme as man’s place in eternity and the cosmos. Vaughan Williams composed his setting in a style similar to *A Sea Symphony*, although he completed *Toward the Unknown Region* without the influence of Ravel’s instruction in orchestration, which altered the final version of the symphony. In 1911 Vaughan Williams composed a setting of “A Dirge for Two Veterans,” which was not published until the composer incorporated it into his cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem* in 1936, providing yet another example of a poem that Wood had set previously. Byron Adams suggests: “Vaughan Williams may well have had in mind the one composed by his Cambridge teacher Charles Wood in 1902. Perhaps memories of the anguish of the Second Anglo-Boer War also played in the younger composer’s choice of text.”

To be sure, political events in Europe had a profound effect on Vaughan Williams’s poetic choices (he would serve in active duty during World War I) as he returned time and again to Whitman. Not only was the selection of “A Dirge for Two Veterans” perhaps politically motivated, Vaughan Williams’ cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem* provided the composer’s response to the impending European conflict in the mid-1930s. His combination of biblical and secular poetic texts in an anti-war composition foreshadows Britten’s *War Requiem*, composed in the aftermath of World War II. In addition to employing “A Dirge for Two Veterans,” Vaughan Williams used “Beat! Beat! Drums!” in a macabre context to illustrate the terrors of war. Adams

describes in great detail the preoccupation of Vaughan Williams and other Victorian and Edwardian composers with the need to project an image of masculinity in response to the perception of musicians as effeminate. Curiously, Vaughan Williams did not alter the poem “Reconciliation” in his *Dona Nobis Pacem*, even though the homoerotic imagery is unmistakable when the baritone soloist sings, “I draw near./Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.”

In his final setting of Whitman, Vaughan Williams breaks fully from the conventions of the Victorian age more than thirty years after beginning his first.

In contrast to the politically active Vaughan Williams, Delius’s later Whitman settings evince no preoccupation with war or political ideas. His later works evoke the same sensuality and voluptuousness found in *Sea Drift*. As Vaughan Williams turned towards setting complete, short poems in his late pieces, Delius, in his 1933 work *Idyll*, composed a musical scena based on fragments from thirteen different Whitman poems. Delius’s friend Robert Nichols and his amanuensis, Eric Fenby, compiled these fragments into a continuous dramatic narrative, which Delius set to the most sensual music. Nichols and Fenby culled the material from some of Whitman’s early poems, including the collections *Calamus* and *Children of Adam* (both found in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*). These two collections had been the most controversial of any of Whitman’s poetry, as they dealt explicitly with sexual desire, both homosexual and heterosexual. In *Idyll*, Delius removes the poetic fragments from their specific context and presents them as an ecstatic love scene between a man and a woman. The *Calamus* fragments used—“Among the Multitude,” “A Glimpse,” and “Fast Anchor’d Eternal O Love!”—provide no indication of the homoerotic overtones that Whitman intended, but rather Delius incorporated them into his overall scene. Wannamaker writes that Delius misses Whitman’s intention

\[23\] Ibid., 36.
completely in his setting of these poems, but this practice of selectively setting Whitman runs throughout the entire catalog, albeit never to the extent of Delius’s *Idyll*.

After the death of his mother in 1873, Whitman had suffered a paralytic stroke. His late poems, including the collections *Sands at Seventy*, *Whispers of Heavenly Death*, and *Songs at Parting*, exhibit a calm equanimity that is much less present in the earlier poems, which are often brash, vigorous, and sexual. Like Whitman, Delius suffered from paralysis as well as near-blindness late in his life, steadily declining in health in the years after World War I. His set of pieces for eight-part chorus and orchestra, entitled *Songs of Farewell*, drawn from the collections *Songs of Parting*, *Sands at Seventy*, and *Passage to India*, served a similar valedictory purpose as had Whitman’s late poems. Delius set the five poems in a fragmentary fashion, with the exception of the complete poem “Joy, Shipmate, Joy!,” which makes up the fourth movement. Delius set the music for the chorus in an almost entirely homophonic texture, which facilitates clear text declamation. In these songs, Delius and Whitman show themselves again as kindred spirits, who were both “drawn to death, yet dreaded it, each resolutely putting aside the consolations of traditional religion.” The poet-composer relationship so important in vocal music seemed a natural collaboration between Delius and Whitman for thirty years.

Charles Wood had contributed a handful of Whitman settings to the early repertory, including four settings for solo voice and piano that date from the 1890s. Ian Copley writes, “Wood had been dabbling in setting Whitman since his student days, and certainly…there was no poet for whose works he had a greater personal sympathy.” After his 1891 song “Darest Thou Now, O Soul,” Wood composed three settings of war poems between 1897 and 1898: “By

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the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” (1897), “O Captain! My Captain!” (1898), and his most enduring solo song, “Ethiopia Saluting the Colours” (1898). Wood composed these songs in the years just prior to the Second Boer War, and as such, established Whitman as a “war poet” for the British. The poems “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” and “O Captain! My Captain!” contemplate life, death, and loss in war, and a number of composers have set both, particularly the famous “O Captain!” However, Wood’s curious setting of the poem “Ethiopia Saluting the Colours” is the earliest, and, in fact, the three existing compositions of that title share a common lineage.

Whitman had written the poem “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors” in 1867, and it first appeared in the 1872 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and in the 1881 edition became part of the group of poems entitled *Drum-Taps*. The poem had not existed when Michael Rossetti published his British volume *Poems of Walt Whitman* in 1868, but Ernest Rhys did include it in his 1886 British edition of *Leaves of Grass*. John Wannamaker writes: “In the choice of ‘Ethiopia Saluting the Colors’ for musical setting there appear to be some racial overtones. This is quite understandable, since this is the only poem dealing directly with a slave subject.” The protagonist of the poem is an elderly woman, ostensibly a freed slave, who appears at the side of the road to greet Sherman’s troops as they march through the Carolinas to the sea. The poet sees her and wonders what things she must have seen in her lifetime as a slave, and how strange it must be for her to experience freedom after a century of enslavement. This poem boldly declares the dignity and humanity of the former slave, and recapitulates Whitman’s vision of universal

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27 For the earlier reference to Wood’s setting of Whitman in relation to the Second Boer War, see pp. 3–4.

28 In addition to Wood, other composers who set “O Captain! My Captain!” include Walter Damrosch, Arthur Farwell, Edgar Stillman Kelley, Normand Lockwood, Cyril Scott, and Kurt Weill.

brotherhood. Could Wood possibly have chosen this particular poem to express solidarity with the black Africans who were caught in the middle of a bloody conflict between two European powers on the African continent? Such a political subtext is certainly plausible given the military conflict in South Africa and in consideration of the centuries-old policy of colonization, which had brought about the enslavement of the African-American woman in Whitman’s original poem years before.

In the year that Wood composed the first of his four Whitman solo songs, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912), a black British composer, had been a student of Wood and Stanford at the RCM, where he began as a violinist in 1890 and left in 1897. The three parts of his oratorio *Song of Hiawatha* (1898–1900), based on poetry of the American Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, premiered in three consecutive years, and earned Coleridge-Taylor widespread fame in Great Britain and the United States. In 1902 Coleridge-Taylor composed the march *Ethiopia Saluting the Colours* for the Treble Clef Club of Washington, DC, an African-American organization led by Mamie Hilyer, who was largely responsible for Coleridge-Taylor’s burgeoning reputation in the United States. He composed the march for orchestra, but as the Treble Clef Club had no orchestra at their disposal, he re-worked it for piano duet. Coleridge-Taylor’s use of a march to depict Whitman’s lines musically recalls Wood’s setting of the poem. Again, Coleridge-Taylor turned to Whitman’s verse for his solo song “Beat! Beat! Drums!,” which he composed as the final song of his *Six American Lyrics*, composed in 1901 and published in 1903. In 1902 Wood composed a song for chorus and baritone solo entitled “A

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Dirge for Two Veterans,” which would influence Vaughan Williams’s setting of the same poem nine years later.33 Both Wood and Coleridge-Taylor contributed a number of war-themed pieces based on Whitman’s poetry before and during the years of the war in South Africa.

The connection between Coleridge-Taylor and the United States, particularly within the African-American musical community, had continued to develop. The composer met the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar in London in 1896–1897, where they gave joint recitals,34 presumably of Coleridge-Taylor’s setting of Dunbar’s verse, the seven *African Romances* (1897), for voice and piano. Coleridge-Taylor made the first of three visits to the United States in 1904 at the invitation of the Coleridge-Taylor Society of Washington, DC35 and there met the singer and composer Harry T. Burleigh. Although U.S. literature influenced so much of Coleridge-Taylor’s music, his first visit to the United States came after he composed his most well-known American-themed pieces.

Black artists and musicians in the United States enjoyed very active and productive years during the two-and-a-half decades between 1890 and the outbreak of World War I. Many black composers, poets, musicians and thinkers, including the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Harry T. Burleigh, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, and in Britain, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, achieved a high level of excellence and renown. Samuel Floyd claims, “Musically, the period 1895 to 1920 appears to have been richer than that of the Harlem Renaissance, that more famous event it helped to create and which, ironically, would eventually destroy it.”36 Burleigh gained notoriety for introducing Antonín Dvořák to African-

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33 For a discussion of Wood’s influence on Vaughan Williams, see p. 9.
35 Banfield and Dibble, “Coleridge-Taylor, Samuel,” in *Grove Music Online*. 
American spirituals and plantation songs in 1892, when the Bohemian composer was teaching at the National Conservatory in New York, where Burleigh was enrolled as a student. Scholars have documented Dvořák’s interest in indigenous music, as he encouraged American composers to find in the music of African Americans and Native Americans a musical foundation upon which to build an American musical identity. At the same time in politics, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) firmly established the constitutionally protected practice of separate-but-equal as the law of the land, especially in the South. In the first years of the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois promoted different methods of responding to the inequalities in society and established a debate that would continue into the middle of the century. In poetry, Ohio native Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872–1906) became the first African American poet to gain a national reputation, and Coleridge-Taylor set Dunbar’s “dialect” poetry in seven solo songs in 1897. Meanwhile, Kelly Miller, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University, delivered a speech in 1895 extolling the influence of Walt Whitman on black writers and intellectuals. This speech, according to George Hutchinson, marked the beginning of the recorded black response to Whitman, which has been kind to the poet: “Probably no white American has had a greater impact upon black American literature than Walt Whitman.” Many of the great African American authors, including Richard Wright and Langston Hughes (whose own contribution to the musical Whitman catalog will be examined in Chapter Four), composed works in a Whitmanesque style. James Weldon Johnson’s reading of

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*Leaves of Grass* would begin the move away from Dunbar’s type of dialect poetry. While Dunbar rejected Whitman in favor of a more genteel style, Johnson, Wright, and Hughes saw that “the black writer must undertake a revolt analogous to Whitman’s.”⁴⁰ Jack Kerkering proposes that Dvořák himself “repeats Whitman’s emphasis on the forms of a New World nation”⁴¹ and thus links Burleigh’s spiritual songs to Whitman’s ideals prior to the dawn of the twentieth century.

Coleridge-Taylor’s major setting of Dunbar, his *African Romances*, dates from 1897, the year before the premiere of the first part of the trilogy *Song of Hiawatha*, which would bring such fame to the composer. In the same year, Coleridge-Taylor’s teacher Charles Wood composed the first of his three Whitman “war” settings. Following the completion of *Song of Hiawatha*, Coleridge-Taylor turned for the first time to a solo setting of Whitman, “Beat! Beat! Drums!,” for solo voice and piano.

George Hutchinson, in his essay “Walt Whitman and the Black Poet,” articulates what makes Whitman different from other nineteenth-century American writers in his portrayal of black subjects and suggests that because Whitman uses neither dialect, nor pitiable helplessness, nor tragedy, he is “particularly important to the black reader because he was the first poet to base his practice on democratic/egalitarian premises.”⁴² Whitman demonstrated his embrace of all people, including African Americans, in the lines from his 1856 (pre-war) poem “Salut au monde!”: “You dim-descended, black, divine-soul’d African, large, fine-headed, nobly form’d, superbly destin’d, on equal terms with me!”

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⁴⁰ Ibid., 54.


In Coleridge-Taylor’s visits to America in 1904 and 1906, singers performed his settings of both Dunbar and Whitman, and the culture of black America, in turn, continued to make a strong impression on the British composer. Coleridge-Taylor impressed upon his musical collaborator and supporter, Burleigh, the possibilities of artistic output of the highest caliber. Burleigh performed as baritone soloist in the first American performances of *Song of Hiawatha* with the composer in attendance in 1904 and traveled throughout the country giving song recitals of Coleridge-Taylor’s works in 1904 and 1906. He most-often programmed the songs “A Corn Song,” with text by Dunbar, and, in 1906, the Whitman setting “Beat! Beat! Drums!”

Burleigh and Coleridge-Taylor continued to visit one another during the summers of 1908, 1909, and 1910, and Coleridge-Taylor died in the fall of 1912. Burleigh had his busiest years of creativity from 1914–17, during which time he composed many art songs and spiritual arrangements, including the *Saracen Songs* (1914), to texts of the English poet Fred G. Bowles, and *Five Songs of Laurence Hope* (1915). Also in 1915, Burleigh composed the song cycle *Passionale*, four songs on poetry of his friend James Weldon Johnson, whose poetic style does not employ any of the dialect that may be found in some of the poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, including particularly “A Corn Song.” In this year Burleigh also composed his setting of Whitman’s “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors,” which Ann Sears describes as “one of the most riveting of Burleigh’s works,” and which the composer later orchestrated. Like the earlier setting by Wood, Burleigh employs an accompaniment figure that imitates drumbeats or a marching troop. However, in his song Burleigh uses an American tune, “Marching through Georgia,” in the piano interludes. Burleigh employs this tune, which the abolitionist composer

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Henry Clay Work composed to words describing Sherman’s “March to the Sea,” to great effect in a style similar to that of Charles Ives in order to amplify the meaning of Whitman’s poem. A. Walter Kramer was among the critics who praised Burleigh’s dramatic setting, “No composer…is as well equipped to set the magnificent Whitman lines as Mr. Burleigh.”

The great tradition of Whitman settings began in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century and blossomed in the twentieth, when the reading public and the musical community alike turned to Whitman for inspiration in a time of great conflict. The community surrounding Stanford, Wood, and Vaughan Williams at the RCM played a decisive role in integrating the American Whitman into the resurgence of a British musical style. Across the Atlantic, African American literati in the first decades of the twentieth century were already well-acquainted with the poetry of Whitman, as evidenced by the 1895 remarks of Kelly Miller, and by the influence of Whitman upon such writers as Richard Wright, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor—a member of the British Whitman community—followed in the footsteps of Wood and Stanford, and shared his affinity for Whitman with the American Harry T. Burleigh. Joining the growing community of Whitman enthusiasts, Burleigh, a member of the African-American cultural community that included Wright, Johnson, and Hughes, stood at the forefront of the burgeoning catalog of Whitman settings, which flourished in the 1920s and beyond, as American composers continued to build upon the foundation set in Britain in new and exciting ways.

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Walt Whitman composed, edited, and rearranged *Leaves of Grass* throughout his adult life, from the first edition in 1855 to the final “deathbed” edition in 1891–1892. The sixth edition, however, from 1881–1882, comprises “essentially the final, definitive *Leaves of Grass*”\(^1\) because Whitman had given the poems their final text revisions, their last titles, and their permanent positions within the book. The perfect storm of events that transpired in the United States between 1882 and the end of World War I catapulted Whitman from a relatively unknown and wholly underappreciated nineteenth-century poet to the most beloved and most often-set American poet of the twentieth century. This change can be traced in the context of music for solo voice and piano—art song—which came to maturity along with the ascendancy of Whitman, as American composers found their own voice and asserted their own identity in the early twentieth century. This artistic identity found expression in various composers’ exploration and use of Whitman’s diverse poetic themes—masculinity, mysticism, transcendentalism, economy of expression, and homosexuality.

In *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman*, M. Jimmie Killingsworth describes some of the major contributions that Whitman made to American poetry. He suggests that the poet “all but invented free verse in English,” “stretched the democratic poetics he inherited from Romanticism to new extremes,” and “likewise embraced subject matter normally considered outside the scope of poetry, including ‘low’ topics associated with the experience of the human

body, sexuality, and the life of the streets.”² In short, Whitman created a new and uniquely American style of poetry in Leaves of Grass, which was sharply at odds with the dominant poetic expressions of the late nineteenth-century United States, namely those of the genteel and decidedly European aesthetic of the New England group sometimes referred to as the “Fireside Poets,” which included Bryant, Holmes, Longfellow, and Whittier. Critical reception of Whitman’s poetry in his own country, therefore, was slow in coming. Portia Baker notes, “In the literary world into which Leaves of Grass was born, Boston, and in time The Atlantic Monthly, uttered the last critical word” and that “a study of The Atlantic Monthly would not perhaps be encouraging to a person looking for influences favorable to Whitman.”³ However, Whitman’s early supporters, especially Horace Traubel, championed his work for twenty-five years after his death until the close of World War I, including, most significantly, the publication in 1906, 1908, and 1914 of Traubel’s multivolume work, With Walt Whitman in Camden, which provided an intimate view of Whitman’s life and ideas. Andrew C. Higgins writes, “Despite his general fame, though, Whitman’s reputation rested largely in the hands of a passionate group of disciples in America”⁴ and Ruth Bohan adds, “Stimulated by the writings of Traubel, Bucke, and others, the audience for Whitman’s verse expanded dramatically in the first turbulent decades of the twentieth century.”⁵ Although Allen suggests that “his country did not ‘absorb’ him during his lifetime—not to any great extent, in fact until about 1955,”⁶ Whitman’s audience was, in fact,


growing, even as the United States changed dramatically in the years between the poet’s death and the end of World War I, and his work found a welcome place in the modernity and urbanization of the United States.

If we consider the United States’s entry into World War I in 1917 as a seminal event in the political, economic, and cultural life of this country, and then look retrospectively at the years between the 1881–1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and 1917, we can see clearly how the nation changed largely from rural to urban, from Anglo-American to multi-ethnic, and from individual to community in dramatic fashion. Walter Nugent’s *From Centennial to World War* provides just such a comprehensive view of the changing American landscape in those turbulent years. He notes that two-thirds of Americans lived in country villages or small towns in 1876, but that only half did so by World War I. The number of farmers as a percentage of the population had decreased from one-half to one-quarter in the same time span, and in social thought, evolutionary pragmatism and a sense of society or community had replaced the individualism of the seventies.7 Gilbert Chase details how immigration to the United States exploded in the years 1880–1920 “on a scale that dwarfed the influx of the preceding hundred years” and that these patterns also “represented a drastic shift from northern and western to southern and eastern Europe.”8 These demographic shifts changed the United States in general, and Whitman’s beloved New York in particular, in such a way that New York replaced Boston as the industrial, intellectual, and cultural center in the new century.

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World War I influenced artistic expression in the United States and Europe. In Boston, Cincinnati, and elsewhere, a culture of “one hundred percent Americanism” prevailed upon cultural institutions during the war, including symphony orchestras, where the government deported German conductors Karl Muck and Ernst Kunwald and the public suppressed German music and culture.9 Ann Douglas describes the American literary landscape before the War as almost devoid of any real scholarly commitment to American writers and writes, “The Great War aided and accelerated the recognition of America’s literary past as decisively as it benefited the American economy”10 and “the Great War benefited the more eccentric and irregular poetic tradition of Whitman and Dickinson as much as it did the heretical prose tradition of Poe, Melville, and Twain.”11 Artists in every discipline sought to throw off the dependence upon European culture and aesthetics in search of something new and American. Ruth Bohan summarizes the role Whitman played in this search:

Modern artists, writers, architects, dancers, composers, and critics also acknowledged Whitman’s authenticating presence in their development of new modes of self-expression….Whitman became a catalyst for a modernism grounded in American cultural experience. A generation revolting against the heritage of its predecessors—yet at the same time in search of its own cultural and artistic footing—found in Whitman a unique combination of change and rootedness.12

Whitman’s influence on American poetry itself is not, however, explicitly clear. William Everdell traces Whitman’s impact on the creation of free verse in French poetry in the 1880s

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11 Ibid., 212.

with Rimbaud and Laforgue, but the American poets, including Pound and Eliot, whom these French poets greatly influenced, were reluctant to acknowledge the influence of Whitman. A 1913 essay in *Poetry* made Pound “the first major American poet to acknowledge Whitman’s influence.” It seems that poets, critics, and the reading public were unwilling or unable to accept Whitman in his entirety at this time. According to Higgins, Whitman’s poetics had influenced very few writers up through the first decade of the twentieth century, and when high moderns accepted his poetry, they were vexed by his political ideas. Still further, British and American audiences in the early twentieth century, as well as the poets Pound, Eliot, Lowell, Crane and Williams, did not accept his sexuality. In poetry and in music, many artists took from Whitman what they wanted and ignored the remainder. This is equally true for American composers of vocal music in the early twentieth century, whose settings speak perhaps more about the composer than about the poet.

Just as American poetry before World War I adhered to a genteel, European aesthetic (excepting, of course, Dickinson and Whitman, who were largely unknown and undervalued), mainstream American vocal music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had as its foundation the late-Romantic German Lieder tradition. The composers of the Second New England School, including John Knowles Paine, Horatio Parker, and George Chadwick, studied in Germany and aspired to create music that could be seen as equal in quality to their European counterparts. They composed many art songs in the tradition of Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Felix Mendelssohn, and set poetry of European and contemporary American poets.

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15 Ibid., 443–47.
These composers were the first to establish American academic music departments and conservatories, and Paine was the first American to attain the rank of professor of music when he did so at Harvard in 1875. In addition to these composers, Edward MacDowell, who had lived in Europe for a decade, returned to the United States in 1888, as David Noble describes “to write romantic music in the German tradition that he admired so greatly.” Furthermore, MacDowell’s music “tended to find inspiration in a fantasy world that had no relation to the economic and political conflicts that were so savagely dividing America in the 1880s.” MacDowell, whose music shows the influence of French as well as German music, was a professor of music at Columbia, while Chadwick taught at New England Conservatory, and Parker was professor at Yale. These composers, whose work is of immeasurable value in establishing an American music education tradition at the university level, taught the next generation of composers who would help to create a more idiosyncratic American style in the twentieth century, including three composers born in the 1870s who were greatly influenced by Whitman: Arthur Farwell, Charles Ives, and Carl Ruggles.

Although the first sustained compositional tradition of Whitman settings came from British composers between the 1880s and the 1930s, and most of the major U.S. settings date from 1915 and after, some American composers before the War turned to Whitman for inspiration. Frederic L. Ritter, a French-born American who immigrated to Cincinnati and lived there for five years before moving to New York, composed the first known setting of Whitman

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18 Ibid., 186.
when he set “A Dirge for Two Veterans” for narrator and piano in 1880.  

Philip Dalmas, a gay American composer who lived briefly in England at the turn of the century, composed *Four Songs from Whitman*, which Novello published in 1901. Dalmas joined the so-called Eagle Street College, known later as the Bolton Whitman Fellowship (whose members were referred to as the Bolton Whitmanites), in 1894 and virtually “cast a spell” over its members.  

W. H. Neidlinger composed *Memories of Lincoln*, an extended song setting of three Whitman poems, which John Church Company in Cincinnati published in 1920, and three songs for solo voice at the turn of the century, namely “When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom’d” (1897), “Life and Death” (1900), and “The First Dandelion” (1901). Homer Norris, one of Arthur Farwell’s teachers in Boston, composed *The Flight of the Eagle*, a piece for soprano, tenor, and baritone solos with piano, in 1903. This single piece, published by G. Schirmer, presents six Whitman poems on socio-political themes, including “For You, O Democracy,” “Song of the Universal,” and “The Whole Earth.”  

One final example of American pre-War settings is the special case of Louis Campbell-Tipton (1877–1921), who left the United States for Paris in 1905, and composed perhaps the only settings of Whitman in France before 1950. Although Whitman’s free verse influenced such late nineteenth century French poets as Laforgue, no French composer produced any of the Whitman settings listed in Michael Hovland’s bibliographic study *Musical Settings of American Poetry*. Only Campbell-Tipton’s four songs and some songs of the British composer Eva Spaulding are even found in French translation. Campbell-Tipton composed “Rhapsodie” in 1913, “Invocation” in 1915, and two fragmentary settings of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard

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19 For biographical information about Ritter, see the Frederic Louis Ritter Collection website, maintained through Tufts University, <http://www.library.tufts.edu/Tisch/berger/Ritter/whoWasRitter.html>.


Bloom’d,” entitled “At the tomb” and “Elegy,” in 1918. William Treat Upton writes that with the first two songs “he seems once more to have found himself, and these two songs are poetically conceived, dramatic, expressive, musicianly” although the composer “maintains the German idiom throughout.”

From Campbell-Tipton’s vantage point as a French resident during World War I, his choice of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” for musical setting in 1918 is particularly poignant. The aftermath of the War was the single most important factor in the reception of Whitman among American song composers, whose output dramatically increased at the end of the War, which nearly coincided with the centennial celebration of the poet’s birth in 1919.

Although the musical style of the composers of the Second New England School could largely be described as “Germanic,” perhaps no better word describes some of their students than “individual.” Charles Ives (1874–1954), Carl Ruggles (1876–1971), and Arthur Farwell (1872–1952) each studied composition in New England with a leading member of the Second New England School—Ives with Parker at Yale, Ruggles privately with Paine (who was at Harvard), and Farwell privately with Chadwick (who was at New England Conservatory). Of the three, only Farwell undertook major compositional study in Europe when he studied with Pfitzner and Humperdinck in Germany and Guilmant in Paris, although upon his return to the United States, he devoted his life to fostering a distinctly American musical aesthetic to be considered in the next chapter. Both Ives and Ruggles composed in an idiosyncratic style, but were not expressly interested in creating specifically “American” music. Whitman, however, influenced both, and each contributed musical settings to the catalog.

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The question of musical “Americanism” is, as it pertains to Ives, a problematic consideration. Larry Starr describes Ives’s “independent search for an American art music [that] involved a conscious attempt to define and utilize materials and techniques characteristic of, and unique to, America…without resorting to restrictive narrowness and self-conscious provincialism or regionalism,” while Barbara Zuck describes Ives as “a patriot, not a musical Americanist, and surely not a mimic of Europe” who “succeeded in creating a uniquely varied and bafflingly complex musical language.” Although many composers and artists in the post-War era saw Whitman as representing a brash break from the Romantic American poetry of Longfellow, Whittier, and Holmes, Ives, composing mostly before the War, incorporated Whitman into the pantheon of these nineteenth-century American poets, all of whom he set and later gathered up for his collection 114 Songs. For Ives, Whitman represented a masculine and virile embrace of American Transcendentalism, which is clearly shown in his single, eponymous setting, the song “Walt Whitman.”

Ives exhibited a strong connection between literature, philosophy, and music throughout his work, not only in his songs but in such works as the Concord Sonata, whose movements are each dedicated to an American Transcendentalist. Peter Burkholder illustrates that his sensitivity to and affinity for literature stems from two primary sources: William Lyon Phelps and his future wife, Harmony Twitchell. Phelps taught Ives English literature in his freshman and sophomore years and nineteenth-century American literature in his senior year at Yale. In the American literature class, Phelps likely taught many of the writers about whom he had published: Whittier, Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and the Alcotts, and as a student Ives himself


submitted a paper on Emerson—which was “promptly handed back”—to the *Yale Literary Magazine.* Following his years in New Haven, Ives’s literary tastes were encouraged further in his courtship of Harmony Twitchell, who encouraged Ives to spend time reading and contemplating literature. The urging of Harmony bore fruit in such works as the “Emerson Concerto,” the *Concord Sonata*, the projected but never composed overtures “Men of Literature,” which were to include Browning, Emerson, Whitman, Arnold, Whittier, and Henry Ward Beecher, and the choral number “Walt Whitman.”

Gay Wilson Allen writes unequivocally, “Nearly all scholars now agree that Emerson himself was the one single greatest influence on Whitman during the years when he was planning and writing the first two or three editions of *Leaves of Grass.*” The most audacious and well-known portion of these first two editions is the extended poem “Song of Myself,” from whose twentieth stanza Ives selected a portion that he set in the song “Walt Whitman” (slight alterations in text and punctuation are the composer’s):

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Who goes there? Hankering, gross, mystical and nude;  
How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?  
What is man, anyhow? What am I? What are you?  
All I mark as my own, you shall offset it with your own;  
Else it were time lost a-listening to me………………..

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Ives set this excerpt for chorus and orchestra in 1913, although he did not complete the orchestration, and eventually lost the score to the original version. He reworked the piece as a solo song for voice and piano in 1921 and from this version re-created a choral version in the same year. In her analysis of the song, Ruth Friedberg proposes, “One sees this as probably a

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26 Ibid., 100.

musical representation of strength, both that specifically referred to in the text and the strength that Ives felt pervaded Whitman’s life and art.” An examination of the score shows this depiction of strength in the angular melody and accent marks that appear above every chord in the piano accompaniment until the final four measures, where Ives specifically indicates a faster tempo with no decrease in volume. Friedburg suggests, “The lifelike suggestion here is that the song has simply stopped, not ended.”

Whitman’s bold manifesto represents a brash and very masculine response to the political and literary world. Ives’s brief setting proposes philosophical questions that neither the poet nor the composer answers definitively. To ask in so brazen a fashion appears to be the point itself. David Noble discusses in detail Ives’s role in American musical culture at the turn of the century and proposes that male New England composers were obsessed with being the ideal bourgeois citizen and that they worried about music being seen as effeminate, as emotional and not rational. He further claims: “Around 1900, he [Ives] experienced another spiritual crisis. He now saw the genteel tradition as European not American, aristocratic not democratic, feminine and not masculine.” Thomas Clarke Owens similarly casts the gendered rhetoric of both Ives and Whitman as a metaphorical contrast between European “softness,” and “hard” and “strong” Americanness. Byron Adams, in his essay on British composers in the Victorian era, illustrates a similar obsession with masculinity at the time among composers including Elgar and

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29 Ibid., 67.

30 Noble, Death of a Nation, 187.

Vaughan Williams.\(^{32}\) Within this Victorian-era context, Ives shares with the British composers a view of Whitman as representative of artistic masculinity, although the musical style and patriotic spirit are not the same.

A similar cultural context provides background for composer Carl Ruggles, who was born to one of Massachusetts’s oldest and most remarkable families, and who studied privately with Paine, although he did not graduate from Harvard, or any other university. In her biography of Ruth Crawford Seeger, Judith Tick paints a picture of Ruggles through the eyes of Crawford Seeger that shows him as “the flinty New England eccentric” whose dirty jokes showed the “rough sea bite in his language.” According to Tick, Ruggles feared that Anglo-Saxon hegemony was being threatened by immigration from non-English speaking countries, and he was proud of his prejudices against the “god-damned Ellis Islanders” and composers of non-British descent who dared to call themselves American.\(^{33}\) As composers, Ives and Ruggles stood outside of both the mainstream and the modernist aesthetic, as they instead found an intensely personal style, which was little influenced by one another, nor, for that matter, their conservative teachers. Paul Griffiths maintains: “Ruggles also shared Ives’s reverence for the great English and American poets of the Romantic period. His beautiful settings of Browning and Whitman in *Vox clamans in deserto* show this, as do his titles and epigraphs.”\(^{34}\) Indeed, Whitman looms large over “the deliberately limited catalogue of Ruggles’s works,”\(^{35}\) especially during the period immediately following World War I.

\(^{32}\) Adams, “‘No Armpits, Please, We’re British,’” 30–31.


\(^{35}\) Chase, *America’s Music*, 464.
Henry Cowell championed both Ruggles and Ives as two great American composers, who met in 1929 and developed a strong friendship. Their association with the modernist composers was, however, a little anachronistic, because both Ruggles and Ives had already created their individual compositional style by the late 1920s. Despite this, the music of these two composers was disseminated throughout the United States and Europe through the efforts of Cowell and Edgar Varèse.\(^{36}\) Two pieces of Ruggles’s that premiered under the auspices of Varèse’s International Composer’s Guild show the specific influence of Whitman. One of them, *Portals*, is a piece for orchestra whose title and inscription (“What are those of the known but to ascend and enter the unknown”) Ruggles took from Whitman. This piece appeared in the inaugural issue of Cowell’s *New Music* in 1927.\(^{37}\) In addition to *Portals*, Ruggles began to compose a piece entitled “Sea Pattern,” based on the poem “As if a Phantom Caress’d Me” from 1921–1923, but did not complete it. Ruggles’s only completed setting for voice of Whitman is his “A Clear Midnight,” which is the third and final movement of his piece *Vox clamans in deserto* (1924) for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra. From these three pieces (including the incomplete “Sea Patterns”), one can conclude that Ruggles’s vision of Whitman is not that of Ives. Ruggles chose to set the mystical Whitman, gentle and nostalgic. Gilbert Chase writes that Ruggles “was also drawn to rhapsodic and mystical poets,” including Blake, and reminds us that Ruggles was an accomplished visual artist, whose paintings the Detroit Institute of Arts, among others, own.\(^{38}\) His choice of certain Whitman poems coincides with his compositional style, which is characterized by dependence of line and polyphony, and non-repetition within a


confined space. Whitman the mystic appears in Ruggles’s music in much the same way as Vaughan Williams and Delius present him, although Ruggles, like many of the American composers of the 1920s, tends towards much more concise poems than his British counterparts.

Situated between the American originals born in the 1870s and the so-called “Boulangerie” of her own generation, Ruth Crawford, born in 1901, had received her formal training in Jacksonville, Florida (the same city where Delius lived a generation earlier) and at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago—cities far removed from the cultural centers of New York and Boston. As a young composer, Crawford was among the ultra-modern composers of the 1920s, and her music was identified by dissonant counterpoint and proto-serial techniques.39 Whitman’s profound influence on Crawford did not result in musical settings, but instead helped to create the composer’s overall musical aesthetic. Judith Tick maintains, “The greater truth for her was ‘feeling’ an idea rather than thinking it.”40 She was interested in the ideas of American Transcendentalism, as was Ives, but Ives’s fear of music that was too emotional and not rational was diametrically opposed to Crawford’s interpretation of Transcendental thought. Perhaps the fact that Crawford was a woman allowed her to express musically the “effeminate” quality of transcendence as opposed to Ives’s concept of the “masculinity” of rationalism.41 Like Ruggles, Crawford was influenced by mysticism, but she interpreted Whitman’s democratic view much differently than he did. For her “Whitman also represented the democratizing of inspiration,”42 and she openly disagreed with Ruggles’s


40 Ibid., 222.


42 Tick, “Ruth Crawford’s ‘Spiritual Concept,’” 229.
pejorative view of non-British immigrants to the United States and “challenged his ‘New England prejudices.’” 43 Although she was influenced greatly by Whitman’s ideas and his poetry, she turned to her fellow Midwesterner Carl Sandburg, whom she met in 1925 or 1926, for her setting of both Five Songs on Sandburg Poems (1929) and Three Songs (1930–32). Andrew Higgins claims: “Of all Whitman’s poetic descendents, Carl Sandburg wrote poems that most clearly looked like Whitman’s. When his poem ‘Chicago’ was published in Poetry in 1914, it seemed that Whitman had been resurrected in the Midwest.” 44 George Hutchinson remarks that even Langston Hughes “would undertake a similar journey, backtrailing home from Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay through Whitman to the blues.” 45 Just as Crawford was a leading representative of Midwestern American modernism in music, Sandburg reawakened Whitman’s spirit in the “city of broad shoulders.”

A mutual friend of Carl Sandburg and a contemporary of Crawford, Ernst Bacon (1898–1990) contributed more Whitman settings for solo voice and piano than all but one other composer (Marc Blitzstein, whose nine songs equal Bacon’s output) by 1930. 46 Although known today primarily as a song composer, Bacon’s life was musically and artistically omnivorous. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 for his Symphony in D minor, and he was a close friend to Ansel Adams as well as Sandburg. His writings, especially Words on Music (1960), articulate many of the philosophies and concerns of an American-born composer, conductor, and teacher at mid-century. 47 Bacon had an extraordinary literary sensibility and was

43 Tick, Ruth Crawford Seeger, 111.
among the first composers to create multiple settings of Emily Dickinson, whose poetry and letters became widely available in the 1920s, as well as Whitman. Born in Chicago, Bacon studied at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago as a composer and pianist, served as the assistant conductor of the Rochester Opera Company under Eugene Goosens, and taught at the Eastman School of Music (1925–1928). Following his brief tenure at Eastman, Bacon moved to California, where he taught at the San Francisco Conservatory (1928–1930) and studied composition with Ernest Bloch. Bloch had begun teaching at the Conservatory in 1925, and dedicated his 1926 choral-orchestral piece *America* to Whitman because “he felt that the poet’s vision upheld its inspiration.”

When Bloch left San Francisco in 1930, Bacon remained in California, where he instituted and conducted the Carmel Bach Festival and earned his M.A. from the University of California in 1934. It was during his time with Bloch in San Francisco that Bacon composed and published nine Whitman songs, with two included in his *Ten Songs* in 1928, and eight songs (including one that first appeared in *Ten Songs*) comprising his *Songs at Parting*, published in 1930.

In his essay “On Words and Tones,” Bacon defines his poetic and musical tastes as having stemmed from his early study of nineteenth-century Lieder: “The songs (entire) of Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, yes, even Liszt…meant as much to me as the fugues of Bach, the sonatas of Beethoven, and the various symphonies and chamber works.” He describes further how his study of the German style did not teach him to express poetry in English, and so he turned vainly to Browning, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, and Shelley for inspiration, but did not

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47 For detailed biographical information about Bacon, please see the Ernst Bacon Society’s website, <http://www.ernstbacon.org>


find what would become his poetic essentials: “brevity, singleness of mood, absence of classical allusion and metaphor, metrical simplicity, and a language musical enough to invite music.”\textsuperscript{50}

He found in American poetry his two great inspirations at around the same time—Dickinson and Whitman—and learned economy of expression from Dickinson, and took from Whitman “his all-embracing sympathy and generosity, his Biblical eloquence, his poetic geography and love of places, his respect for the commonplace, and his vast faith in democracy.”\textsuperscript{51} From these two poets, he created dozens of settings, and the songs are, in fact, characterized by brevity and singleness of mood. Additionally, Bacon knew the singing voice well (he had, after all, worked in opera for many years), and created settings that are clearly intelligible and vocally gracious.

In the article “An American Precursor of Non-tonal Theory: Ernst Bacon (1898–1990),” Severine Neff presents Bacon’s 1917 article “Our Musical Idiom,” in which he describes an organizational method of non-tonal pitch collections that predates Allen Forte’s similarly constructed system by more than fifty years. Later in life, however, Bacon disavowed his work in relating mathematics to music when he said to Neff, “I gave up Ziehn for Schubert.”\textsuperscript{52} (Ziehn was the theorist whose ideas provided the basis for Bacon’s work.) Although his work relies to a great extent on “nondiatonic scales, American subjects, and masterly counterpoint,”\textsuperscript{53} Bacon consciously moved away from an adherence to mathematical analysis of music in the wake of World War I in order to create his own personal style in the Romantic spirit of the German art song masters.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.


As with Crawford, Ives, and Ruggles, Whitman’s poetry provided a means of personal expression for Bacon. It seems strange, though, that Bacon would find in Whitman, whose long lines and free verse changed the face of American poetry, his essential qualities of brevity and metrical simplicity. Just as the British composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found inspiration in their own view of Whitman, Bacon carefully chose the poems that provided him with his desired aesthetic. His first Whitman setting is a familiar one: “Beat! Beat! Drums!” composed in 1928. At twenty-one lines, it is the longest of Bacon’s nine early settings, and had been established as a beloved and well-known war poem in the wake of the Second Boer War in Africa (Coleridge-Taylor’s 1903 setting) and American involvement in World War I (W. H. Neidlinger’s 1920 setting). The eight poems set in Songs at Parting alternate between the well-known (“Joy, Shipmate, Joy!,” “The Last Invocation,” and “Darest Thou Now, O Soul”) and the obscure (“Grand is the Seen” and “The Sobbing of the Bells”), but all are relatively short poems from late in Whitman’s life that present a single mood. The musical settings are likewise straightforward. Bacon uses no repetition of text, and only his relatively long setting of “Darest Thou Now, O Soul” provides much solo opportunity for the pianist. Of primary importance for Bacon is the intelligibility of text declamation, and he achieves it well in these songs through transparency of texture and attention to vocal melody.

Walt Whitman was the first great gay American poet. His poetry, which embraced and exalted both the body and the soul, dealt with homosexuality in a manner that was, especially for his time, explicit and frank. Killingsworth summarizes the poet’s influence: “Whitman participated in bringing gayness into history by developing a rhetoric with the resonant power of an established discursive formation. In other words, Whitman helped to invent gayness.”

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Likewise, George Chauncey, documenting homosexuality in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, writes, “Walt Whitman was heralded as a prophetic spokesman by many such men, who regarded Whitman’s celebration of ‘the manly love of comrades’ as an affirmation of the nobility of their love.”\(^{55}\) Whitman believed that sexual themes—both homosexual and heterosexual—were so central to the overall plan of *Leaves of Grass* that he was unwilling to remove the collections entitled *Calamus* and *Children of Adam* from the book despite Whitman’s admiration for Emerson and his strong recommendation to do so.\(^{56}\) A great portion of the critical and public reception of Whitman has been uneasy regarding his audacious embrace of sexual themes. British composers other than Frederick Delius largely ignored his sexuality, as did the high modern American poets Eliot, Pound, and Williams, and Charles Ives interpreted Whitman’s bold sexuality primarily as a metaphor for the masculine strength of the United States. The literary and musical establishment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ignored Whitman’s homosexuality or even, in the face of incontrovertible evidence, tried to suppress it. In his impassioned essay “The Casualties of Walt Whitman,” Richard Tayson—himself a gay American poet—describes his own skepticism toward Whitman’s homosexuality as late as 1992 because of the ambiguous and uneasy descriptions of Whitman’s sexuality he found in the Norton Critical Edition of *Leaves of Grass* as a graduate student in creative writing at NYU. Tayson soon found the clarity he sought regarding Whitman’s homosexuality in the 1955 discovery of the original manuscript of the poem “Live-Oak, with Moss,” which “Against all odds…tells of homosexual desire, loss, and loneliness in a poet whose enormous body of work


is, on the whole, obsessively optimistic and exuberant.” Whitman, however, censored the expression of his own intensely personal sexuality and did not publish “Live-Oak” in its original format. Furthermore, although an early manuscript of the poem “Once I Pass’d Through a Populous City” used masculine pronouns to describe his lover, that version also was never published during Whitman’s lifetime. Both Emory Holloway and Fredson Bowers, who found the manuscripts in question, remarkably continued to forward an interpretation of the great American poet as anything but gay.

By the 1920s in America, homosexuals in New York and other large cities had established large enclaves such as Greenwich Village and Times Square and “gay life was more integrated into the everyday life of the city in the prewar decades than it would be after World War II.” Into this milieu in Philadelphia stepped a young and talented composer, Marc Blitzstein (1905–1964), who used solo song settings of Whitman to re-establish the sexual—indeed homosexual—vibrancy of his poetry. The story of Blitzstein’s nine solo song settings of Whitman links together the varied threads of music and theater found in 1920s America.

Blitzstein’s parents had emigrated from Russia to the United States through the port of Philadelphia in 1889 and in that first year established a bank—M. L. Blitzstein & Company—that served the city’s burgeoning Jewish population. The Blitzsteins arrived at the beginning of a large immigrant wave: in 1890 Philadelphia had fewer than 10,000 Eastern European Jews; by 1910 it was home to over 100,000, and by 1930, more than 200,000. The Blitzstein home, however, was “inclined toward socialist ideas and decidedly unreligious.”

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58 Ibid., 85.
59 Chauncey, Gay New York, 2–3.
prodigious talent at the piano and in his own compositions was evident from an early age, and he enrolled at the newly formed Curtis Institute of Music in October 1924 after two unfulfilling years of study at the University of Pennsylvania. His field of specialization was composition, and he studied with Rosario Scalero, who had taught Virgil Thomson and would later teach Samuel Barber, Gian Carlo Menotti, and Lukas Foss, among others. Earlier in 1924 Blitzstein had traveled to France with the conductor Alexander Smallens, who “introduced Marc to intercourse, which the nineteen-year-old found painful and rarely tried again.”61 This trip solidified Blitzstein’s homosexual identity and established a musical relationship with Europe, which would influence his Whitman settings a few years later.

Blitzstein composed his first four Whitman songs in 1925, as a Curtis student: “Joy, Shipmate, Joy!,” “After the Dazzle of Day,” “As If a Phantom Caress’d Me,” and “What Weeping Face.” These four songs, and some of his piano pieces from the same year (“Pavane,” “Variations on Au Clair de la Lune,” “Sarabande,” “Danse Basse,” and “Danse Haute”), reveal the influence of French impressionism and the chromaticism of Hugo Wolf. The songs are “cautiously dissonant” and “feature eminently singable vocal lines.”62 Carl Ruggles had begun to set the poem “As If a Phantom Caress’d Me” as “Sea Pattern,” in 1921–23, but never completed it. Unlike Ruggles, however, Blitzstein evokes a certain undercurrent of homoeroticism that spoke to his own sexuality:

As if a phantom caress’d me,
I thought I was not alone walking here by the shore;
But the one I thought was with me [as] now as I walk by the shore,
the one I loved that caress’d me,

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61 Ibid., 19.

62 Ibid., 22.
As I lean and look through the glimmering light, that one has utterly disappear’d,
And those appear that are hateful to me and mock me.

Blitzstein uses, at the words “was with me,” the technique of *Sprechstimme* as a means of heightening the tension in the poem and perhaps to indicate the sort of fear that a young gay man such as Blitzstein might have felt in his particular environment. The vocal melody of this chromatic song, which is set in c-sharp minor, ends on the highest note of the song (F#4), two eighth notes sung *forte* with accents on the words “mock me,” over a fully diminished seventh chord, and the postlude, a restatement of the piano introduction, returns to the tonic key. Here, Blitzstein turns to Whitman, whom many gay men in the 1920s regarded as their champion, for the first time to express his own psychological portrait. Blitzstein explored this expressly sexual connection between himself and Whitman further in his later settings of the poet. Of these, David Metzer writes, “His songs represent one of the boldest celebrations of Whitman’s homoeroticism by an American artist, a remarkable distinction given the oppressive environment in which they were written.”

In the fall of 1926, Blitzstein moved to Paris to become, as so many American composers of the 1920s did, a part of the so-called “Boulangerie,” a group of students, including Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Roy Harris, who studied composition with Nadia Boulanger. Boulanger promoted the clear, expressive style of the Franco-Russian tradition, lead at the time by Igor Stravinsky. Under her tutelage, Blitzstein set Whitman’s poems “Gods” and “O Hymen! O Hymenee!” in January 1927. These settings were a radical departure from the accepted Whitman settings of the previous fifty years. Although Blitzstein later composed three

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additional Whitman songs, Blitzstein here began to set poems that were audaciously sexual and irreverent. “Gods” is a poem in the tradition of Goethe’s “Prometheus” and the writings of Nietzsche, in which the poet sings of the accomplishments of man and proclaims the value of human ability without deference to a religious God. “O Hymen! O Hymenee!” is the first Blitzstein setting from Whitman’s collection *Children of Adam*. John Wannamaker, in 1972, wrote: “The *Children of Adam* and *Calamus* poems have commanded only a moderate amount of attention from composers, and most are the work of but a small group of composers who appear to have transferred any homosexual overtones in the poems into heterosexual love songs.”

Among the composers who removed Whitman’s erotic poetry from its context is Delius, whose *Idyll* creates a narrative of poetic excerpts and a continuous heterosexual love scene. Blitzstein is the only composer before 1950 to embrace the homoerotic themes of these poems in song.

After less than five months’ study with Boulanger, Blitzstein left Paris for Berlin, where he began his brief study with Schoenberg. Boulanger did not favor the severe aesthetic of the Austrian composer. According to Gordon, “Most composers fell into one school or another; no one could be a partisan of both Stravinsky and Schoenberg,” and Blitzstein “was the only American to study with both Boulanger and Schoenberg.” Blitzstein bristled under the austerity of Schoenberg’s aesthetic and did not remain as his student for long. However, while he was studying in Berlin, Blitzstein composed the second setting of *Children of Adam*, entitled “As Adam.” Upon his return to the United States in 1927, and with his formal musical training

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66 For a further description of Delius’s Whitman settings, see Chapter One.
complete, Blitzstein composed his last two Whitman settings for solo voice, “I Am He” and “Ages and Ages,” which incorporate elements of jazz and “represent a musical homecoming.”

Blitzstein subtitled his last four Whitman settings *Songs for a Coon Shouter.* The theatrical tradition of “coon shouters”—mostly female—who donned blackface and sang in a loud, brash manner, was out of fashion by the late 1920s, but Blitzstein tried to evoke a performance style and a certain racial subtext to the sexuality of Whitman’s verse. In addition to the jazz elements in the songs, he used Whitman’s erotically charged poetry to emphasize the sexual urge implicit in the songs of the “coon shouters.” This audacious setting of Whitman’s poetry in such a racially and sexually charged manner left no doubt as to the character of the poems and the songs—these songs were about aggressive sexuality. As Metzer notes, “In Blitzstein’s songs, the cultural forces of Whitman and jazz collide, an impact producing racial, cultural, and sexual sparks.” By the late 1920s, Whitman was accepted in America as the “Good Gray Poet,” as he had been immortalized in William Douglas O’Connor’s 1866 pamphlet, written as a defense of the poet following his dismissal from government office allegedly because he had written an immoral book, and as supported by the 1905 English biographer Henry Bryan Binns. Even Emory Holloway, whose 1920 discovery of the original pronouns used in “Once I Pass’d Through a Populous City” should have supported Whitman’s status as a gay poet for mainstream America, maintained Whitman’s presumed heterosexuality, or at least his asexuality. Metzer states Blitzstein’s interpretation clearly: “Transgressing against this dominant asexual view of Whitman, Blitzstein was among a group of readers, homo- and

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69 These last four songs are “O Hymen! O Hymeneel!,” “As Adam,” “I Am He,” and “Ages and Ages.” Although Blitzstein composed two in 1927 and two in 1928, he collected the four songs into the subtitled group.

70 Metzer, “Reclaiming Walt,” 71.

heterosexual, who responded to the poet’s celebration of the male body and began to scrape away the encrusted prejudices surrounding his poetry.”

In post-World War I America, Whitman became the favorite poet of a young generation of composers looking to establish something new and somewhat independent of the cultural hegemony that Europe had long exerted over the United States. The various aspects of Whitman’s magnanimity—masculinity, mysticism, transcendentalism, economy of expression, and homosexuality—expressed themselves in various ways through the poetic themes used in compositions of various American song composers throughout the 1920s. With the poet being thus established in the pantheon of American literature, the stage was set for a national campaign that co-opted Whitman’s name and presumed political ideals in the following decade.

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CHAPTER THREE

Choral Settings of Whitman in New Deal America

Just as the years of the First World War dramatically transformed the culture of the United States, so the events of October 24, 1929 and the economic depression that followed changed the way Americans viewed themselves economically, politically, and artistically. By March 1933, at the depth of the Great Depression, those without employment numbered between thirteen and eighteen million in a labor force of only fifty-one million. Among the unemployed, musicians were especially hard-hit. The increased popularity of radio in the 1930s coupled with the advent of sound films in 1927 significantly reduced the demand for live musicians, whose workload further declined as the sale of instruments (especially pianos) and demand for private lessons diminished as a result of the overall economic downturn.1 In this context, many musical artists, as well as a significant portion of the American electorate, turned to the political Left for answers and support, and the poet of choice to champion the cause was Walt Whitman. Additionally, American composers in the 1930s often used the medium of the chorus to articulate Whitman’s democratic views and to personify the communal aspirations of this segment of the American political body. With Whitman firmly established across the country as a national hero for the working class, as evinced in the sale of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius’s “Little Blue Books” of Whitman’s poetry,2 as well as being the darling of the intellectual and artistic elite, this chapter traces how Whitman became the emblem for the decade’s political and social reforms.


In the early 1930s, such artists, intellectuals, and composers as Aaron Copland believed that the crash of the stock market and the despair of the Depression were the result of the inevitable collapse of the capitalist marketplace, the capricious self-interest of which destroyed the fraternity of citizens committed to the national interest. Marx enjoyed a very real presence within the artistic community at the time. As Barbara Zuck indicates: “Political leftism in the 1930s simply became a common framework in which the American intelligentsia expressed their idealism and humanitarianism. Artists found in leftism a focus for social outrage, and their work increasingly reflected their concerns.” They conceived of an international industrial landscape that would replace the irrational capitalist market, and they used American folk music and folk-like themes to depict their conception of this utopian America. Whitman himself had “regarded music as a prime agent for unity and uplift in a nation whose tendencies to fragmentation and political corruption he saw clearly. Music offered a meeting place of aesthetics and egalitarianism. For all the downward tendencies he perceived among contemporary Americans, he took confidence in the shared love of music.” It is not surprising, then, that such politically minded artists would hold up Whitman’s ideas and his very words as their artistic and political ally. Whitman’s early adherents, especially Horace Traubel, had presented the poet as a proto-socialist and, according to Andrew C. Higgins, “The work of these writers securely established Whitman as the prophet—and at times, the messiah—of the American left.”

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The problem, however, with this posthumous co-opting of Whitman is that the poet did not necessarily share the political beliefs of those who championed him in the twentieth century. Bryan Carman describes the sometimes contentious relationship between Whitman and Traubel during the poet’s last years, spent in Camden: “Traubel’s mentor did not approve of his politics. In one of his ideological sparring matches with Traubel, Whitman condemned his understudy for his ‘radical violence’ and warned of the dangers of political revolution.”7 Although Whitman saw rampant materialism as the central problem in the Industrial Age, he did not believe that riches themselves were bad, nor did he believe in overthrowing the government. His solution to what he saw as a spiritual problem was to cultivate a certain spiritual or religious element, and he called upon literature to act as the key conduit for such a transformation. He “attacked the literary classes of the day for their genteel remoteness from the masses, for their unwillingness to pursue democracy.”8 In the end, as Gary Wihl writes, “Every aspect of Whitman’s politics rests on his projection of democratic individuality” and that “His politics cannot be understood apart from the poetic expression of individuality.”9 Although Whitman sang the praises of the people assembled, one of his greatest contributions to poetic style was the extensive lists of people and places named individually in his poems. Whitman never lost the individual among the masses in his poems nor in his politics. This chapter considers the American musical response to setting Whitman in the 1930s by composers who represent divergent political and artistic views, namely, the neo-Romantic and politically conservative Howard Hanson on the one hand, and the


first established lineage of American Whitman settings found in the music of Roy Harris and William Schuman on the other.

In the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt took the oath of office as President of the United States in January 1933, and quickly began to implement the most audacious and comprehensive federal assistance program ever attempted. Generally known today as the “New Deal,” this program consisted of various programs including the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the National Recovery Administration (NRA). In her book *A History of Musical Americanism*, Barbara Zuck details the role of music in the early PWA and its significant presence in the WPA. Harry Hopkins, the architect of the WPA, established the WPA Arts Projects, whose goal was to disseminate art on a national scale, especially to those who had previously been culturally isolated. Zuck writes: “Hopkins viewed the possible contributions of the Arts Projects…at least as equal to the more tangible achievements in the other WPA programs.” The Federal Music Project (FMP) of the WPA, whose “favoritism toward performance of native works was…formulated and articulated at a national level,” lasted eight years—as long as the WPA itself—until 1943 when the war effort took precedence. A significant boon to the composition and performance of American music, “the existence of WPA performing units receptive to American music appears to have prompted a ‘grass roots’ creativity from composers who, under other circumstances, would have lacked a forum” and as of March 1940, more than eight thousand works by some twenty-four hundred American composers had been performed by the FMP. Although the composers presented here did not compose their Whitman settings

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11 Ibid., 165.
specifically for the FMP, each one actively participated in the project and created settings of Whitman that articulate the aspirations of the Project in particular and the Zeitgeist of the nation in general.

In his *A Conductor’s Guide to Choral-Orchestral Works*, Jonathan D. Green writes, “It is Whitman who has become the poet of choice for composers of large works in this century” and “The relationship between the poet’s words and composers’ choice of group singing is a reflection of the universality of Whitman’s poetic voice.”13 As discussed in Chapter Two, American composers of the 1920s established Whitman as the favorite poet in works for solo voice, but by the following decade, there were almost no American settings of the poet on the large scale employed by British composers such as Stanford, Vaughan Williams, and Delius. These American works appeared in the United States for the first time in the mid-1930s.14

To be sure, American composers certainly set the poetry of Whitman chorally prior to the 1930s. Many of the most prominent composers, including George Chadwick, Arthur Farwell, William Wallace Gilchrist, Charles Ives, and Harvey Loomis, contributed one choral setting to the catalog even before 1920. The most popular Whitman poem for these settings was “O Captain! My Captain!,” which was “the most conventional poem that Whitman published after 1855.”15 Its metrical regularity and communal spirit lend the poem well to choral composition. There are, according to Hovland, twelve known choral settings of the poem before 1940.

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12 Ibid., 166–67.


including those of Walter Damrosch, Arthur Farwell, and Edgar Stillman Kelley. Composers set these in each decade between 1900 and 1940, thus indicating the enduring popularity of the poem and its appropriateness for choral setting throughout the first half of the century. It is, however, with Howard Hanson’s 1935 work, *Songs from “Drum Taps,”* that major American composers began to set Whitman’s poetry for large-scale forces.

Howard Hanson (1896–1981) had been born in Wahoo, Nebraska into a Swedish-American family in a largely Swedish community. His biography is one of a musical and academic prodigy, having earned a diploma from Luther College in Wahoo in 1911, another diploma after one year’s study at the Institute of Musical Art (later the Juilliard School), where he studied composition with the conservative theorist16 Percy Goetschius, in 1914, and a B.A. from Northwestern University in 1916. At 20 years old, Hanson took a job as professor of theory and composition at the University of the Pacific, and became dean of the Fine Arts Conservatory there three years later. In 1921 he won the Prix de Rome and during his three years at the American Academy in Rome composed several of his important early works, including the Symphony No. 1, ‘Nordic.’ During this time, he may have taken some orchestration lessons with Respighi. When Hanson returned to the United States, he accepted the invitation of George Eastman to become the director of the Eastman School of Music in 1924, where he instituted his “vision of a truly ‘American’ music school,”17 which integrated music performance with music history and literature in one school, unlike the European model that separated the academic disciplines from the applied music study. He instituted the Doctor of Musical Arts as the terminal degree and supported “the encouragement of American music in


17 Ibid., 114.
particular." His work as director of the school (1924–64) and as founder and administrator of Eastman’s Festivals of American Music (1931–71) made Hanson “directly responsible for the performance of more American music than any individual.” Like Ernst Bacon, who taught at Eastman from 1925 to 1928, Hanson published a theoretical work, *Materials of Modern Music* (1960), that anticipated the application of set theory, but also like Bacon, Hanson chose to compose music in a more Romantic style and often chose Whitman to convey his ideas. Hanson’s compositional style was a conscious protest against Schoenberg’s ideas and style, and he was a “bold and outspoken advocate of music as a euphonious vehicle for untrammeled emotional expression during a period when the new-music community had become hostile to such a point of view.” Although Hanson believed that “music had little to do with politics and economics” and that Shostakovich’s politically oriented music was “uninteresting,” he “further marginalized himself by aligning himself with some extreme aspects of right-wing culture” and promoted “clean-cut Christian values” in his life and music. Hanson’s view of Whitman and of America can be documented in his 1935 work *Songs from “Drum Taps.”*

Hanson set *Songs from “Drum Taps,”* a set of three songs, for chorus, orchestra, and baritone soloist. The use of the baritone solo voice continues the English preference found in the major Whitman settings of Stanford, Delius, and Vaughan Williams. The orchestral parts include prominent brass and percussion, especially in the first movement. The choral parts are not demanding in range or tessitura, and the textures promote intelligibility of text throughout.

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18 Ibid.


20 Simmons, *Voices in the Wilderness,* 119.


22 Simmons, *Voices in the Wilderness,* 116.
The songs should not be performed in isolation, as the three movements constitute a larger formal design of fast-slow-fast and something like ripieno-concertino-ripieno.

For the first movement, Hanson set the familiar poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” Hovland lists five earlier settings of the poem than Hanson’s, including Bacon’s song from 1928; Coleridge-Taylor’s song from 1903; and Charles Loeffler’s 1917 setting for unison male voices, percussion and wind orchestra, which David P. DeVenney calls “the first lengthy choral work” among American Whitman settings. Hanson sets the complete poem in an energetic and straightforward style. A forty-measure martial introduction sets the mood for the movement, which rests heavily on the military images in the poem. Hanson never repeats text in his setting of the twenty-one-line poem, but sometimes gives a certain voice only the syllable “Ah” to sing while another voice continues to declaim the text. This proves to be a useful tool as Hanson inserts a six-measure interlude of “Ah” in all four voices after the words “Let not the child’s voice be heard, nor the mother’s entreaties.” The already established use of this vocable transforms to become a clever use of text painting that organically develops from the choral texture. Hanson includes almost no polyphonic textures in the movement, as the choral homophony clearly delivers the impassioned call to arms, which is further underscored in the accompaniment.

The second movement, “By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame,” contrasts sharply with the first, as it is marked *Adagio assai* and scored only for baritone solo—who declaims the text—and chorus, which sings the syllable “Ah” throughout. There is a striking similarity in character between this movement and the second movement of Vaughan Williams’s *A Sea Symphony*, entitled “On the Beach at Night Alone,” which also sets a poem of nostalgia and intense personal

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reflection at night for baritone solo and accompanimental chorus. Hanson uses the wordless chorus to great effect in this movement. As the baritone sings of “a phantom far or near,” the humming chorus provides the sonic depiction of the phantom. At the climactic “While wind in procession thoughts, O tender and wondrous thoughts/Of life and death, of home and the past and loved, and of those that are far away,” the chorus changes from a hum to “Ah” to articulate the change from trepidation to wonder before returning to humming as the movement ends serenely.

In contrast to the complete poetic settings of the first and second movements, Hanson sets for the third movement an incomplete poem that is not, in fact, from the collection “Drum Taps.” “To Thee, Old Cause!” comprises the last of the “Inscriptions” found at the beginning of the 1871 version of Leaves of Grass, and Hanson created the first known musical setting of the poem. However, of the eighteen lines of the poem, Hanson sets only five and does not even set these completely. The choice of text within the poem speaks to the narrative that Hanson chose to create in the final movement of his work. Like the first movement, “To Thee, Old Cause!,” begins with a bombastic orchestral introduction, which exuberantly re-establishes the military mood of the work. After a homophonic opening choral section on the first three lines of the poem, “To thee, old Cause! / Thou peerless, passionate, good cause! / Thou stern, remorseless, sweet Idea!,” the second section includes a fifty-measure polyphonic passage of only the words “Deathless throughout the ages.” Hanson chose to depict musically the immortality of the “cause” in this extended passage but omitted the remainder of Whitman’s line, which reads “Deathless throughout the ages, races, lands.” Furthermore, for the remainder of the movement,

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Hanson sets only the words “These chants for thee, the eternal march of thee,” and Songs from “Drum Taps” culminates in a celebration of the eternal force that inspires and drives us to strive for the greater good.

Hanson’s choice to select portions of Whitman’s poetry is certainly not new—Vaughan Williams, Stanford, and especially Delius all did the same—but the omission of the two words “races, lands” from an already short selection from the eighteen-line poem speaks volumes. The “Old Cause,” which Whitman describes in the poem with the words “(I think all war through time was really fought, and ever will be really fought, for thee)” universally acknowledges the need, at times, to go to war, and the recognition that the war itself (and its Cause) have created, to a certain degree, his book: “my book and the war are one.” In the context of international politics of the 1930s that loomed over the composition of this piece as well as Vaughan Williams’s 1936 Dona nobis pacem and the nationalistic fervor that existed at the same time, Hanson’s word selection seems to be a calculated effort to extol the virtues that might compel the United States into war without acknowledging the same for her enemies. If the “Old Cause” is, in fact, “Deathless throughout ages, races, lands,” then perhaps one could apply it to the fascism of Spain, Italy, or Germany. Although Hanson composed Songs from “Drum Taps” in 1935, his omission consciously denies such ideas and a celebration of the moral certitude enjoyed by the later American artist who, in the late 1930s “seemed to seek refuge in an easier, less critical expression of traditional American values as if to present a strong, unified national image.”

Unlike the first sustained compositional tradition of Whitman settings, which began at London’s Royal College of Music in the late nineteenth century with Stanford and continued until the mid-1930s in the music of Vaughan Williams, such a corollary tradition did not exist in

26 Zuck, A History of Musical Americanism, 110.
the United States until the early twentieth century with the musical lineage of Farwell, Harris, and Schuman.

Arthur Farwell (1872–1952) had studied composition in Boston in the 1890s with two composers, George Chadwick and Homer Norris, who, in the early twentieth century, each contributed one Whitman setting to the catalog—Chadwick’s 1910 setting of “Darest Thou Now, O Soul” for *a capella* men’s quartet and Norris’s 1903 work for solo trio, *Flight of the Eagle*, which combines six Whitman poems into a single musical composition. However, had his teachers known about Whitman’s poetry in the late nineteenth century, they did not share their affinity with Farwell, for it was the German poet James Grun—a friend of Humperdinck and Pfitzner, with whom Farwell studied in Germany—who introduced Farwell to the work of Whitman in 1898.27 As founder of the Wa-Wan Press, a publication dedicated to the promotion of American music, Farwell chose Whitman’s phrase “I Hear America Singing” as the Press’s motto in 1901.28 Although Farwell’s only setting of Whitman was his 1918 “O Captain! My Captain!” for mixed chorus and piano, his admiration for the poet’s philosophy influenced his spirit of patriotism and national pride that “sought the best for his country and its people,” and the composer inculcated this sense of patriotism and love of Whitman in his most famous student, Roy Harris.29

Barbara Zuck writes: “In the 1930s and early 1940s, no composer was more ‘American’ than Roy Harris. Nor did the music of any composer—even Aaron Copland’s—receive the acclaim of Harris’s symphonic works in this period.”30 Although mostly regarded as a

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28 Ibid., 87.

29 Ibid., 283.
symphonic composer, Harris penned a number of choral pieces during the 1930s and early
1940s, many on the poetry of Whitman. In stark contrast to the symphonic forces that provided
the composer such high esteem, Harris composed all of these Whitman settings for a cappella
chorus, which Wannamaker describes as “the very epitome of concerted effort,”31 and which the
composer used to articulate the democratic vision he shared with the poet.

Harris began serious compositional study relatively late in life when he took lessons with
Farwell in California at age twenty-seven. This brief (1924–1925) tutelage proved to be very
fruitful, and in 1926 Farwell encouraged Harris to send the score to his one-movement Andante
for orchestra to Hanson, whose Rochester Philharmonic gave the work its premiere. That
summer, the New York Philharmonic repeated the piece in its summer concert series.32 The
performances of the Andante also garnered Harris a visit to the MacDowell Colony, where he
met Copland “who promptly encouraged the less-experienced composer to follow his example
by studying with Boulanger in Paris.”33 Harris lived and composed in Paris for four years
(1926–29), winning two Guggenheim Fellowships (in 1927 and 1929), and studying with
Boulanger throughout. As a student, Harris “apparently insisted on his own course of study
based on the examination of past masterworks including chant, Renaissance polyphony, Bach,
and Beethoven”34 and bristled under the formalism of Boulanger’s approach. He lived outside of
Paris itself and maintained his independence from his fellow students, both personally and

30 Zuck, A History of Musical Americanism, 221.

31 John Wannamaker, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Study of Theme, Structure,
and Prosody” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 111.


33 Beth E. Levy, “The White Hope of American Music, or How Roy Harris Became Western,” American

34 Ibid., 137
artistically. In Paris, “Harris was not urban or cosmopolitan; he was not a typical Boulanger pupil; he was not interested in the dissonances or intricacies associated with much of musical modernism; he was not Schoenberg, and he was not Stravinsky.”35 In short, Harris, like Whitman, was tenaciously independent.

In the early 1930s, Harris met Serge Koussevitsky, for whom he wrote his Symphony 1933 and through whom came his first national recognition.36 Koussevitsky later premiered Harris’s most enduring work as well, his Third Symphony, in 1939. During this successful decade, Harris taught at Westminster Choir School (later College) from 1934–38 and at Juilliard during the summers in the same years. At Juilliard, Harris taught William Schuman, and at Westminster he gained significant experience composing for choral ensemble. Harris composed his first major Whitman settings for the Westminster chorus and another for Schuman’s choir at Sarah Lawrence College.

Harris composed his initial Whitman setting for a cappella eight-part chorus in 1934, “A Song for Occupations.” Hovland indicates that Harris’s setting of this poem is the first of five choral settings, including those by Otto Luening and Normand Lockwood.37 An extended poem in six sections, Whitman’s “A Song for Occupations” sings the praises of the working class, and Traubel, among others, used this poem as a rallying cry for their political ideals. Bryan Carman writes, “Grounded in the political tradition of natural rights, [Traubel’s] socialism did not seek to create a new sense of equality but rather proposed a reorganization that would restore the idealized pre-industrial economy Whitman presented in ‘A Song for Occupations.’”38 Carman

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35 Ibid., 139.


further claims, “Besides providing the foundation for Traubel’s labor reforms, ‘Song for Occupations’ enabled socialists to advocate more egalitarian gender relations.” In choosing this particular poem and setting it for a cappella mixed chorus, where men and women are united evenly in pursuit of a common goal, Harris presents in musical form some of the aspirations and political ideals of the poem as seen in the context of mid-1930s America.

Harris also composed his more ambitious 1935 Symphony for Voices for Westminster Choir School. Like Hanson’s Songs from “Drum Taps,” Harris cast his piece in three movements, each on a different poem, and its second movement likewise features a solo voice, in this case a soprano. Harris uses an eight-part choral texture throughout the piece, and John Proffitt describes its challenges, “The main stylistic elements are harmony, rhythm, and dynamics, the manipulation of which through wordless ostinati, harmonized choral recitative, choral Sprechstimme, and a truly instrumental treatment of the human voice gives this Symphony the character of a choral Mount Everest.” However, Dan Stehman writes, regarding Harris’s compositional style for chorus, that although the composer writes “something new and wildly original,” “it is solid and conventional in the sense that the chorus is handled in much the same way as it is by most of the relatively conservative composers of his generation. There is thus a kinship not only with some of his American colleagues, such as Randall Thompson, Aaron Copland, and William Schuman, but also with such Europeans as Vaughan Williams, Walton, and Poulenc.”

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38 Garman, A Race of Singers, 46.

39 Ibid., 47.


For the first movement of the *Symphony*, Harris set the complete poem “Song for All Seas, All Ships,” the same one that makes up a considerable portion of the first movement of Vaughan Williams’s *Sea Symphony*. The 9/8 meter of this movement almost immediately depicts the motion of a ship at sea, and the robust choral energy and largely homophonic writing brings to mind the choral works of William Billings. For the second movement, also a complete poetic setting, Harris chose the poem “Tears,” which, like “Song for All Seas,” comes from the collection *Sea Drift*. In this movement, Harris makes effective use of choral *Sprechstimme* as the men of the chorus pronounce the first line of the poem, “Tears! tears! tears!” in repeated sighs throughout the first half of the piece, while the treble voices vocalize on “Ah” and “Oh.” The soprano solo declaims the poem over this lamenting backdrop, and Harris depicts the somber and desperate mood of the country in this movement before reawakening the hope and vigor of Whitman’s vision in the third movement, which is a setting of an excerpt from the very first poem of *Leaves of Grass*: “Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power, / Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine, / The Modern Man I sing.” The choral polyphony at the words “Cheerful, for freest action” reveals the influence of the Renaissance masters upon Harris’s bold and energetic compositional style. As an example of text-painting, the polyphonic texture emphasizes the independence of Whitman’s “Modern Man” and provides a fitting contrast to the largely homophonic writing of the rest of the piece.

Harris’s ingenious use of text-painting can also be found in two of his later Whitman settings for *a cappella* chorus. He composed his 1938 *Whitman Triptych* for William Schuman’s women’s chorus at Sarah Lawrence College, and the first movement, “I Hear America Singing,” actually sets no text at all. Instead of setting the familiar poem that inspired Harris’s teacher Farwell, among others, Harris simply creates a texture of vocalizing to illustrate “America
singing.” In his 1941 compositions that were grouped together as Songs of Democracy, Harris set “To Thee, Old Cause” and, like Hanson, only set the first half of the poem. Unlike Hanson, however, Harris set the first seven lines in their entirety, including the line: “Deathless throughout the ages, races, lands.” The second of the songs, “Year That Trembled,” laments the imminent clouds of war and the destruction that war can bring. For the last of the songs, all composed in summer of 1941 but only later gathered for publication, Harris set an excerpt from the poem “The Commonplace”: “The open air I sing, freedom, toleration, / The common day and night—the common earth and waters, / Your farm—your work, trade, occupation, / The democratic wisdom underneath, like solid ground for all.” The chorus repeats these few words often in this movement, including, significantly, the word “toleration,” which gains musical emphasis through longer notes and repetition, notably in one particularly long passage. Only months before the United States’ entry into World War II, Harris composed these songs that embrace Whitman’s love of work, an all-encompassing democracy, and a sense of compassion and respect for others, evident in Harris’s various Whitman settings from the 1930s and early 1940s.

Hearing a performance of Roy Harris’ Symphony 1933 in 1936 had so impressed the young composer William Schuman (1910–1992) that he decided to seek out Harris to be his composition teacher, when Schuman was preparing to teach a course in orchestration at Columbia’s Teachers College and Harris was teaching at the Juilliard School, just two streets north of Columbia. Schuman had received some formal training in music and enjoyed some success as a popular song writer with Edward B. Marks and Frank Loesser before his twenty-first

42 Proffitt, liner notes, I Hear America Singing!.

birthday. He had begun composing seriously during 1932–1935 and studied conducting at the Salzburg Mozarteum in 1935, but it was Harris’s influence that remained important, especially in his orchestral music and his own settings of Whitman. Harris’s Song for Occupations particularly influenced Schumann’s early settings of Whitman— the first of which, “Pioneers,” Schuman composed in 1938.

While Whitman’s poem “O Captain! My Captain!” had consistently been the most popular poem in American choral settings before 1940, the poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” proved to be particularly popular between 1925 and 1939, during which span Hovland lists seven choral settings. Regarding settings of this poem, Wannamaker notes, “Not a single one of the settings uses all of the twenty-six verses; few, as a matter of fact, even use more than half that number” and “Almost without exception, all musical versions use the first two and the fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas…subsequent selections all tend to reinforce the dominating themes of the opening stanzas.” Schuman’s setting of the poem follows this pattern, although he changed the order of the stanzas by presenting, in order, the first, second, seventeenth, tenth, fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas, in whole or in part. As a formal design, the clearly defined sections of the music correspond to the stanzaic structure of the poem, with the exception of the fourth and fifth stanzas, which Schuman presented in one long musical section. The compositional and formal style of Renaissance motets favored by Schuman’s teacher, Harris, can be heard in this eight-part a cappella work. The overall impression of Schuman’s poetic choices, however, calls one to

44 Ibid., 43.
46 Hovland, Musical Settings of American Poetry, 397. Rutland Boughton (1925), Vernon De Tar (1936), Harvey Grace (1927), Stuart Hoppin (1938), Harl McDonald (1939), William Schuman (1938), and Alfred Whitehead (1933) composed the seven American choral settings between 1925 and 1939.
action. The opening lines, which return at the end of the piece, state: “Come, my tan-faced children, / For we cannot tarry here, / We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger, / We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend.” Schuman found Harris’s politics “highly suspect” when he suggested that “nothing will ever happen to Jews in America, they’re too powerful,” and he strongly articulated his support for the cause to defeat fascism in his powerful setting “Pioneers.”

Aaron Copland championed Schuman’s “Pioneers,” and his enthusiasm for the work led Copland to write, “Schuman is, so far as I’m concerned, the musical find of the year….From the testimony of this piece [“Pioneers”] alone, it seems to me that Schuman is a composer who is going places.” Copland’s introduction of Schuman’s work to Koussevitsky eventually led to the premiere of Schuman’s *A Free Song: Secular Cantata No. 2*, which won the first Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1943. Schuman, who had recently failed a physical examination preventing him from military service, made his intentions clear for *A Free Song*: “Since I cannot serve in the Specialist Corps I am trying to do what I can with my pen. The first work is a Cantata for Chorus and Orchestra which Koussevitsky will perform. It has wonderful words by Walt Whitman. If I’ve done my job well it can’t help but be a moving patriotic affair.”

The cantata consists of two sections, the first of which includes the first three lines of the poem “Long, Too Long America”: “Long, too long America, / Traveling roads all even and peaceful you learn’d from joys and prosperity only, / But now, ah now, to learn from crises of anguish,” and almost the entirety of the poem “Look Down, Fair Moon,” which presents a ghastly view of the military dead bathed in the light of an impartial moon. For the second

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48 Polisi, *American Muse*, 44.

49 Ibid., 49.

50 Ibid., 71.
section, Schuman set selected lines from the extended poem “Song of the Banner at Daybreak,” an exultant celebration of the pursuit of freedom and liberty. Schuman changed the poet’s word “I” at the beginning of each line to a communal “We,” and this democratic spirit can be heard in the very composition of the work, which Jonathan Green describes as “a very approachable score for singers and players alike.” The three poems in this work come from the popular collection *Drum Taps*, in which Whitman deftly combines graphic images of the costs of war with the sometimes-necessary call to arms. Here, Schuman—like Kurt Weill, whose World War II-era Whitman settings will be considered in the next chapter—turns to these poems in a musical and emotional appeal to the United States for continued commitment to and support for the war in Europe.

The broad scope of Whitman settings and his equally wide appeal to Americans in the 1930s and early 1940s found their greatest expression in the large-scale choral works of the major composers of the era, who continued to promote Whitman as both the “Poet of Democracy” and “America’s Bard.” In the following decade, German composers who came to the United States in search of the freedom and democratic principles that Whitman had promoted, contributed some of the finest and most meaningful settings found in the entire catalog.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Whitman, German Émigré Composers, and World War II

*Do I contradict myself?*
*Very well then I contradict myself,*
*(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

—Walt Whitman, from “Song of Myself,” section 51

In its all-encompassing poetic vision, *Leaves of Grass* is replete with seeming contradictions: individual liberty and collective responsibility, heterosexuality and homosexuality, the call to arms and the need for peace, brash youthfulness and aged reminiscence, and American nationalism and international cooperation. In each of these, composers have found something particular with which to identify with the poet and by which to claim him as their own. The public, artistic, and critical reception of Whitman had firmly established him as the “Poet of Democracy” by the end of the 1930s, and he became the spokesman for American ideals at the outset of World War II. Barbara Zuck writes, “Growing concern over the threat of Hitler diminished the preoccupation with America’s internal difficulties” and “In the late 1930s, many artists seemed to seek refuge in an easier, less critical expression of traditional American values as if to present a strong, unified national image.”

Kim H. Kowalke notes the towering presence of Whitman during this wartime milieu: “As the nation mobilized for war following the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Whitman moved up to the front lines.” In 1945 the Armed Services Editions, a division of the Morale Branch in the U.S. War Department, issued *A Wartime Whitman*, a collection of Whitman’s

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poetry that presented him as “a virile heterosexual man, a trumpeter of democracy, a person equivalent to a medic with direct experience with war, a fellow a GI wouldn’t mind sharing a foxhole with.”\textsuperscript{3} The Armed Services Editions, whose intended audience was U.S. soldiers stationed overseas, have been called the largest book giveaway in history.\textsuperscript{4} This proliferation of Whitman’s work among the military personnel during World War II, in addition to his earlier role within the American political left in the 1930s, provided a significant portion of the American public a certain familiarity with and appreciation for the poet and his work. However, despite the presentation of certain aspects of his poetry to certain groups, on the whole, Whitman’s poetry maintains an ambiguity regarding, among other things, nation and identity, which is summarized by Eldrid Harrington: “One of Whitman’s most astonishing achievements is his claim for the ultimate abnegation of both [nation and identity], at the very moment that he commits himself passionately to each” and “He turned to advantage the uncertainties within the state of the nation, and showed how there could be ecstasy in the loss of self and hope in the seeming dissolution of the nation.”\textsuperscript{5} This abnegation of a nativist American view and the hope for a defeated nation resonated strongly with Germans in the aftermath of World War I, and, specifically, with two German émigré composers, Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill, who, in turn, influenced the American musical reception of Whitman during and after World War II.

Gay Wilson Allen unequivocally writes in \textit{The New Walt Whitman Handbook}: “In no other country in the world has Walt Whitman been so extravagantly admired and even


\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 156.

worshipped as in Germany.”6 Allen details the history of the German Whitman reception, which had begun with Ferdinand Freiligrath’s 1868 translation of some of Rossetti’s edited poems7 and continued with the Rolleston-Knortz edition of 1889.8 Johannes Schlaf, who “became Whitman’s ‘prophet’ in Germany,”9 published a very popular translation in 1907,10 and the ebbing of its popularity in 1910 signaled the end of the “first great wave of Whitman enthusiasm in Germany.”11 Only a few years later, however, the German labor press discovered Whitman, and a second, more popular Whitman movement began at the dawn of World War I and continued until Whitman’s influence rapidly faded after 1922. This second movement included another translation by Hans Reisinger in 1919.12 Germans enthusiastically celebrated Whitman’s centennial in 1919, “when the war ended, Whitman became in Germany the poet of peace, and also more than ever the symbol of Democracy,” and “during the turbulent years in Germany from about 1918 to 1922 the American poet of Democracy seems to have been all things to all men.”13 As the hope for democracy in Germany waned and the specter of fascism grew, Whitman fell out of favor, and many German artists in the 1930s and early 1940s, including


Hindemith and Weill, brought their enthusiasm for Whitman, born in the aftermath of World War I, to the United States, where composers had cultivated a fertile ground for his musical setting in the intervening years.

According to David Reynolds, Whitman “saw the [Civil] War as a necessary cleansing agent” that “accomplished what he hoped his poetry would accomplish” and “blew away many of the social ills that his early poetry had tried to rectify.”14 Specifically, his poetry changed after the War due, in large part, to his experiences in the hospitals, where “The soldiers he saw in the hospitals, he would say later, saved him and saved America by displaying all the qualities he associated with ideal humanity.”15 His Civil War poetry, notably the collections Drum-Taps and Memories of President Lincoln, had become popular among composers in the years following World War I and resurfaced before, during, and after World War II. In the best-known of these poems, “O Captain! My Captain!” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” Reynolds notes: “The silencing of his former poetic self is noticeable. Both poems marginalize Whitman and concentrate on Lincoln” thus “changing the poet’s role from that of America’s imaginary leader to that of eulogist of its actual leader.”16 German composers were particularly attracted to these poems, as “the large majority of German settings of Whitman poems deal with the theme of war.”17

Just as Rossetti’s English edition provided the link between the American Whitman and his first German translator, so, too, did the English composer Delius likely bridge the musical gap between Whitman and Germany. Delius’s wife, Jelka Rosen, abridged and translated “Out

15 Ibid., 127.
16 Ibid., 131–32.
17 Grünzweig and Grünzweig, “Eros, Expressionism, and Exile,” 49.
of the Cradle” for a German publication of Delius’s composition *Sea Drift* in 1906, and the composer Franz Schreker, who in 1924 composed his own Whitman songs, had conducted a performance of the piece with the Philharmonic Choir in 1912. Between the German performance of *Sea Drift* and the publication of Schreker’s Whitman songs, the young Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) composed his *Drei Hymnen von Walt Whitman* in 1919. With this set, Hindemith became the first major composer to set Whitman in German for solo voice, and the songs occupy an important place in his entire oeuvre.

Hindemith was among Whitman’s most ardent admirers and later claimed to have taught himself English by reading *Leaves of Grass*. For *Drei Hymnen*, Hindemith set Schlaf’s translations of “Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals,” “Sing On, There in the Swamp,” and “Beat! Beat! Drums!” With these songs for baritone, which were most probably the first of his songs for voice and piano to be performed in public, Hindemith turned to an expressionist style, which boldly illuminates the audacity of Whitman’s poetry. Composed in the year of Whitman’s centennial and in the immediate aftermath of Germany’s defeat in World War I, these songs present a trilogy that is by turns erotic, nostalgic, and macabre. For the first song, Hindemith set “Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals,” a short, explicitly autoerotic poem from the collection *Children of Adam*:

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19 Ibid.


Ages and ages returning at intervals,
Undestroy’d, wandering, immortal,
Lusty, phallic, with the potent original loins, perfectly sweet,
I, chanter of Adamic songs,
Through the new garden of the West, the great cities calling,
Deliriate, thus prelude what is generated, offering these, offering myself,
Bathing myself, bathing my songs in Sex,
Offspring of my loins.

This poem, whose only other musical setting is Marc Blitzstein’s 1928 “Ages and Ages,” powerfully stands in for the creative process as seen by Whitman and embraced by Hindemith in his newly expressionist style, which, among other things, eschews the use of time signature in order to promote an adherence to Whitman’s irregular poetic meter. This style—and the words of Whitman in Schlaf’s translation—articulate not only a new artistic direction for German music after the War, but also the hope for democratic governance that had inspired Schlaf so deeply. For the second “hymn,” Hindemith set “Sing On, There, in the Swamp,” the thrush’s lament from the extended poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” perhaps an elegiac farewell to the old ways, which were demolished in the war, and whose terror is represented in the final song, “Beat! Beat! Drums!” Although Whitman intended this poem primarily to be a call to arms, Hindemith captures the irony of the inexorably violent verse, much the same way that Vaughan Williams later set the same poem in 1936 for Dona nobis pacem. Hindemith composed the first and third songs in a high tessitura, and the strong dynamic level indicated commands a vocal range similar to that of late Romantic German lieder composers, such as Strauss and Schoenberg. The second song is much softer in dynamic, but still exploits the upper baritone range. These three seemingly unrelated poems thus coalesce in the Drei Hymnen in poetic content and musical style to announce a new musical and political aesthetic for post-War Germany.

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22 For a discussion of homosexual themes in Blitzstein’s songs, please see Chapter Two.
By the mid-1920s, Whitman’s influence in Germany had begun to wane even as the specter of war and totalitarianism rose in an increasingly frustrated and demoralized Germany. Schlaf’s vision of Whitmanian democracy never materialized. In the 1930s, the political situation in Germany continued to veer away from democracy and toward the political and cultural oppression of Fascism. In the 1920s, the Nazis adopted the idea of *Entartete Kunst* to demonize music that was supposedly “degenerate,” and which, according to Hitler, manifested symptoms of national decline. The 1938 *Entartete Musik* exhibit in Düsseldorf specifically named Schoenberg, Hindemith, and Weill as offenders, and they, among other composers and artists, were considered “defamed.”23 Many of these artists fled Germany and immigrated to the United States, where composers in previous decades had firmly established Whitman as a favorite poet for musical setting. Hindemith and Weill each contributed to the growing catalog of Whitman settings in America as they brought their enthusiasm and affection for the poet with them to their adopted homeland. Each composer’s settings of Whitman reflect their own concept of the role of the artist in society, and their readings of the poet reflect the various and seemingly contradictory ideas found in his poetry.

Kurt Weill (1900–50) arrived in the United States in September of 1935 as a registered “enemy alien” and applied for U.S. citizenship after reentry almost exactly two years later. He very quickly assumed a politically active role as a composer and a private citizen. He “became a full-time patriot in both his private and professional lives” and even served as a civilian plane-spotter for Rockland County during World War II.24 He “contributed directly to the war effort, composing for films, broadcasts, and recordings made by the Office of War Information and the

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War Department” 25 and, in reference to composing orchestral music during the war, wrote: “It seems so silly just to write music in a time like this.”26 Furthermore, Kim H. Kowalke claims, “With the exception of Lady in the Dark, virtually every project begun after Weill’s initial application for citizenship in 1937 had focused on an American theme, or, after Britain and France declared war on Germany in September 1939, had been intended to rally the nation against his former homeland.”27 These projects include the musical pageant “The Common Glory” (1937), the stage work Knickerbocker Holiday (1938) and the cantata Ballad of Magna Carta (1940). During their work on “The Common Glory,” lyricist Paul Green gave Weill a copy of Leaves of Grass.28 This, however, was not Weill’s introduction to Whitman, as he had previewed a broadcast reading of the poet’s work for a Berlin radio journal in 1926.29 Still, Weill turned to Whitman’s poetry in late December 1941 in the days following the attack on Pearl Harbor to create a set of songs that articulated his nationalistic zeal and support for entry into war.

The convoluted creation of what became Weill’s Four Walt Whitman Songs comprises a story of passionate nationalism tempered later by retrospective equanimity in the post-War era. Weill quickly composed the first three of the songs, “Oh Captain! My Captain!,” “Beat! Beat! Drums!,” and “Dirge for Two Veterans,” between late December 1941 and March 1942, when he performed them for his wife, Lotte Lenya, and the actress Helen Hayes, with whom Lenya was


26 Kurt Weill, Letter from Weill to Ira Gershwin, 28 May 1941, quoted in ibid., 113.

27 Kowalke, “I’m an American!,” 111.

28 Kowalke, “Reading Whitman/Responding to America,” 211.

29 Kowalke, “I’m an American!,” 110.
Hayes was so impressed with the songs that she asked Weill to compose underscoring for patriotic recitations that would be entitled *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, which included the poem “Beat! Beat! Drums!” The ordering of the patriotic recitations was as follows: “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “America,” “Pledge to the Flag,” and “Beat! Beat! Drums!” Victor Records recorded the recitations over Weill’s hastily composed music at the end of March 1942 for the pro-war organization Fight for Freedom. By placing the Whitman poem at the end of the recording following the recitation of perhaps the most familiar patriotic American texts, the recording makes clear Whitman’s poetic call to arms for the war effort. While Hayes recorded “Beat! Beat! Drums!” as a poetic recitation, the three songs themselves did not fare so well with no evidence of a public performance during Weill’s lifetime. Like much of Weill’s music, Kowalke suggests, the songs occupy a precarious space as a hybrid within the “notoriously ill-defined boundaries between ‘serious’ and ‘popular,’ ‘high’ and ‘low,’ ‘cultivated’ and ‘vernacular,’ ‘European’ and ‘American,’ ‘autonomous’ and ‘occasional.’” Moreover, the three poems themselves, in Weill’s ordering, convey a convoluted narrative. For instance, “O Captain! My Captain!,” written after the death of Lincoln, tells of a battle that is won at the cost of losing the captain of the ship, “Dirge for Two Veterans” clearly looks back nostalgically at what was lost in war, and, as Jürgen Thym argues, Weill “misreads the poem [“Beat! Beat! Drums!”] when he interprets it as a ‘call to arms.’” Although the artistic ambiguities and seeming contradictions of Weill’s songs put him in line

30 Ibid., 114.


32 Kowalke, “I’m an American!,” 115.

33 Ibid., 119.

with Whitman in that regard, the musical and poetic irregularities of the set do not provide the unified message that the nation sought and which Weill evidently hoped to create. In July 1947, upon his return from a European tour, Weill composed the fourth of his Whitman songs, “Come up from the Fields, Father,” and re-ordered the four songs to create a cycle that celebrated the sacrifices of the soldiers, mourned the recent death of Roosevelt, and reflected on the need to have gone to war in the first place. Weill also transposed the first three songs to create a cycle for tenor voice and piano, which William Horne recorded in 1947. Thym writes that “in its 1947 ordering, the cycle reinforces Whitman’s own ambivalence toward war” and that “in the neighborhood of the laments, the song [“Beat! Beat! Drums!”] sounds less trigger-happy.”35 Of the four-song cycle, Kowalke notes, “Weill, like so many Liederkreis composers before him, converted a group of disparate poems into a dramatic narrative”36 to create, as Thym proposes, “perhaps Weill’s most moving and humane musical response to the war between his two homelands.”37

Between the composition of the first three Whitman Songs and the fourth, Weill composed his American opera, Street Scene, in 1946. This piece, according to David Drew, was the fulfillment of Weill’s ambition to compose “an American opera” that would integrate drama and music, spoken word, song and movement.38 To that end, Weill chose Elmer Rice’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1929 play of the same title to tell the tragic story of urban American life. Rice insisted that he himself adapt the play as a libretto, but he agreed to bring on the African-American poet Langston Hughes to “lift the everyday language of the people into simple,
unsophisticated poetry.”39 This trio of artists was fully committed to Whitman and his vision. Hughes was one of the foremost Whitman disciples of his generation who, while working with Weill and Rice on Street Scene, published an introductory essay to International Publishers’ I Hear the People Singing: Selected Poems of Walt Whitman entitled: “The Ceaseless Rings of Walt Whitman,” in which he praised Whitman as one of literature’s “great faithholders in human freedom.”40 In addition to this volume intended for young readers, Hughes prepared at the same time another anthology about African Americans and Native Americans entitled: “Walt Whitman’s Darker Brothers,” which was rejected by both Doubleday and Oxford University Press.41 In Rice’s 1929 play, the first act climax of Street Scene incorporates two selections from Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” spoken by Sam Kaplan in an intimate scene with Rose Maurrant. Kaplan quotes the first stanza, perhaps to indicate to the audience the poem’s title before Rose interrupts Sam and asks him to recite instead the third stanza, wherein the poet breaks a sprig of lilac from the bush to offer as a memorial to the fallen president. Rather than eulogize, Rice uses the image of the lilac to represent hope for Rose, at least until she considers the possible consequences of stealing a flower from a bush that she does not own. In Weill’s operatic rendering of the scene, he omits the first stanza entirely, and Rose and Sam sing Whitman’s third stanza together in an ecstatic duet, where the hope of something better abides. In the play, the Whitman reference ends with Rose despondently dismissing the idea of breaking off the lilac bloom, but in the opera, Sam and Rose decide that in their dreams such action is possible because the lilac bush would be theirs. Weill’s belief in American ideals and

39 Kowalke, “I’m an American!,” 118.


41 Ibid., 159.
dreams trumps the American-born Rice’s pessimism in this scene, and the first act ends in a spirit of hope for the future.

Kurt Weill’s American experience contrasts starkly with that of Paul Hindemith, who immigrated in February 1940 and lived in the United States for thirteen years before returning to Switzerland in 1953 for the remainder of his life. Unlike Weill, whose zealous patriotism manifested itself in explicitly American works as well as in extramusical activity, during World War II Hindemith spent his time composing and teaching at Yale. During his time in the United States, he garnered fourteen commissions, more than any other composer, native or émigré, in addition to his teaching load, and “took no active role in the American war effort.” Although Hindemith chose not to be politically active, Philip Coleman-Hull proposes that his “retreat into the private arena of composition is initiated by a sincere desire to become a part of the national collective memory that he has so recently joined.” To be sure, Hindemith achieved this goal with his monumental 1946 composition When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d: A Requiem “For Those We Love.”

Composers have set Whitman’s poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” more than any other. John Wannamaker’s 1972 dissertation lists thirty settings of the poem, and Michael Hovland’s 1986 bibliographic study names seven additional settings. Of the thirty listed by Wannamaker, including Stanford’s 1884 Elegiac Ode, only Hindemith set the 206-line poem in its entirety. Whitman wrote four poems, including “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard

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43 Kowalke, “Reading Whitman/Responding to America,” 201.

Bloom’d” and the next most-popular poem for musical setting, “O Captain! My Captain!,” on the death of President Lincoln in 1865. Three of the poems made up the Sequel to the 1865 Drum-Taps, and Whitman ultimately included all four as the final poems of the “Drum Taps” cluster in Leaves of Grass.\(^4^6\) In its formal design and thematic ideas, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” strongly recalls Whitman’s 1860 poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.” Killingsworth explains, “Both poems have the elegiac tone and operatic structure, the singing bird that is a ‘brother’ to the poet (a thrush rather than a mockingbird in ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’), a setting near the shore of the U.S. eastern seaboard (a swamp this time rather than a beach), and the poet returning to nature to mourn and to seek redemption and atonement.”\(^4^7\) The mood of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is, however, more somber than that of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” and the release from distress is, in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” never complete. The poem, in sixteen sections of varying length, presents a narrative in which the poet ranges from deep sorrow to a resigned acceptance of the death that he cannot control and to which he himself will ultimately succumb. The hermit thrush serves as the poet’s companion in the swamp, where the poet seeks refuge, and where he finds some peace with the assistance of the empathetic bird.

For Hindemith, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” maintained special meaning for many years and helped him to come to terms compositionally with the aftermath of both World Wars. The second of his Drei Hymnen (1919), composed immediately after the end of World War I, “forms a lyrical contrast, lying as it does between the hymn-like first and the

\(^{4^5}\) Wannamaker, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 390. All additional pieces Hovland lists are partial settings of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” save for Roger Sessions’s 1974 cantata When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d, which Sessions sets in its entirety. For further discussion of this piece, please see the Epilogue.

\(^{4^6}\) M. Jimmie Killingsworth, The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman, 63.

\(^{4^7}\) Ibid., 64.
aggressive and incessantly moving last piece.”

For this song, “O, nun heb du an, dort in deinem Moor,” Hindemith set the poet’s first song to the hermit thrush in the ninth section of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” given here in the original text:

Sing on there in the swamp,
O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,
I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain’d me,
The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.

While in the United States, Hindemith turned again to this passage in 1943, when he composed the song “Sing On, There in the Swamp” in the original English. This version, half the length of Hindemith’s German version of 1919, is very different in idiom and shares with the earlier song only the melodic gesture of a descending minor third, which depicts the call of the bird. The Hindemiths presented a holograph score of the song as a gift to the judge who would administer the oath of American citizenship to Hindemith in January 1946, and the song immediately thereafter provided the musical foundation for his recently received commission from Robert Shaw’s Collegiate Chorale to compose a large cantata for chorus and orchestra.

Between the November 1943 composition of “Sing On, There in the Swamp” and Hindemith’s decision to use the Whitman setting as the basis for his new commission in January 1946, quite a lot had transpired in the United States and in Hindemith’s native Germany that made the choice of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” entirely appropriate in the context of a secular “Requiem ‘For those we love.’” On April 12, 1945, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, four times elected President of the United States who led the country through the Great Depression and to the height of success in the Second World War, died of a massive stroke. On May 8 of the same year, Germany surrendered to the Allies, and on September 2,

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Japan likewise surrendered unconditionally, thus bringing the War to an end. In the final months of the War, Allied soldiers found concentration camps where millions of Jews and others had been imprisoned and annihilated. Before this, the magnitude of genocide had been largely unknown to the Allied soldiers or to the American public. Eight decades earlier, Whitman wrote “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” as a memorial to a beloved fallen president who led the nation through a bloody war and a very difficult era. Like Roosevelt, Lincoln died in office as war was coming to a close—General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Confederate troops on April 9 and Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865, almost four score years to the day before Roosevelt’s death—and the nation was thus unable to celebrate the victory of the Union whole-heartedly. Similarly, Roosevelt’s death tempered the celebration of the Allied victory, which came within a month afterwards. For Hindemith, knowledge of the extent to which the Nazis exterminated the Jews and others must have been difficult to accept. Many of the musicians with whom he worked in Germany were Jewish and had been labeled “degenerate,” and were thus particularly vulnerable to attack. Additionally, tragedy struck Hindemith’s family directly, when he learned in 1945 that his wife’s mother had died during the conflict (her father, the Jewish conductor Ludwig Rottenberg, had died in 1932).

Strongly refuting Copland’s claim that “one might look in vain through all Hindemith’s recent music for any signs of the cruel years through which Germany and all the world have passed,” Kowalke presents evidence that Hindemith intentionally used a Jewish Yigdal tune, known in the Episcopal hymnal as GAZA, in his quotation of the hymn “For Those We Love” in movement 8 of *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*, and from which he derives the

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50 Ibid., 162–63.

subtitle of the work: *A Requiem “For those we love.”* 52 While Coleman-Hull argues that in *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d*, “Music and poetry, then, intertwine in a reciprocal relationship, so that the ‘Americanness’ of Whitman’s poetry infuses Hindemith’s musical response, and the music, in turn, illuminates Whitman’s text,” 53 Kowalke’s analysis indicates that the intertextuality of Hindemith’s work goes a step beyond the poet-composer relationship, in the spirit of Whitman, to envelop an even larger swath of society than is at first evident. Unlike many of the more self-consciously “American” composers presented in this study, however, Hindemith created his art from an intensely personal and private perspective, saying, “I have always seen myself as a private individual who happens to be a musician, and what the public does with the music I deliver has nothing to do with my private life, just as with this music I do not aim to affect the private lives of others.” 54 In this eleven-movement work for baritone and mezzo-soprano soloists with chorus and orchestra, in which, as Kowalke describes, Hindemith “hides [Americanisms] beneath a cosmopolitan modernist veneer,” 55 the composer deftly incorporates the bugle call “Taps” unobtrusively into the orchestral fabric of the tenth movement. Hindemith expresses Whitman’s poetic meaning through the use of musical materials, as Werner and Walter Grünzweig describe, “The solo voice mingles with the chorus, reflecting both the integration of the individual in the social whole and the claim of the author, not merely to sing with one single voice, but to represent a multiplicity of voices.” 56 Through Whitman’s poetry and his own musical devices, Hindemith, whose German translation of *When

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52 Ibid., 145–56.


55 Kowalke, “Reading Whitman/Responding to America,” 208.

Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d made him the only composer to create his own German translation of Whitman for his own composition, was able to address his deeply conflicted feelings toward both his native homeland and his adopted country, which sentiments are summarized in his fervent response to his publisher, Strecker, who had suggested in 1947 that he must return to Germany soon in order to continue to create beautiful music: “For the working out of long-laid plans, more settled minds should find the Rhine no more important than the Mississippi, the Connecticut Valley, or the Gobi Desert.”

Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill experienced the United States in very different ways, and yet these two composers found a common muse in Walt Whitman. First introduced to them in the German democratic hopefulness of the Weimar Republic, his poetry became a means by which to express their hopes and ideals in their adopted homeland that represented for them the democratic dream that was not yet realized—and yet still hoped for—in their native country. Seen from the American perspective, these two contributed greatly to the burgeoning U.S. tradition of Whitman musical settings and helped to set the stage for subsequent compositions.

57 Ibid., 49.

EPILOGUE

Whitman’s Continued Influence

Although this document has presented themes of identity and context in selected pieces from the first half of the twentieth century, Whitman’s poetic legacy remains as robust as ever among composers in the second half of the twentieth century, and, indeed, into the first years of the twenty-first. Many of the composers presented earlier in this document taught in higher education, where they transmitted their own love of Whitman to their many students, who, in turn, set his poetry to music. Furthermore, political events such as wars, assassinations, and the celebration of America’s bicentennial provided opportunities for Whitman’s poetry to speak to new generations. Composers found already-established themes, such as patriotic zeal, sexual identity, reminiscence in loss, and the beauty of nature, to be as prescient and timeless as did the composers who set these same poems decades earlier. As compositional styles changed in the second half of the century, Whitman continued to inspire composers from various countries and divergent schools, from the most conservative to the avant-garde, all of whom strove for a faithful rendering of the poet’s words and ideas. The many composers to have set Whitman in the years since World War II include John Adams, Samuel Adler, Leonard Bernstein, George Crumb, Norman Dello Joio, Lukas Foss, Philip Glass, Hans Werner Henze, Vincent Persichetti, Ned Rorem, Roger Sessions, Dmitri Shostakovich, Virgil Thomson, and Robert Ward. This epilogue will briefly present some of the major pieces composed since the end of World War II to show that Whitman’s stature has waxed—not waned—in the last sixty years.

Many of the composers presented earlier in this document continued to find inspiration in Whitman well into the second half of the twentieth century. Ernst Bacon, whose 1930 collection
\textit{Songs at Parting} consists of eight Whitman settings, composed six other solo songs and a cantata, \textit{The Lord Star} (1949) for baritone solo, mixed chorus, and orchestra, to Whitman’s poetry. The last of the songs to be published, “Lingering Last Drops,” appeared in 1974. John Wannamaker notes, “Bacon…has contributed more settings of the short poems than any other composer,” and these songs are “almost exclusively concerned with the theme of death.”\footnote{John Wannamaker, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 344–5.}

William Schuman’s \textit{Carols of Death} (1959) for \textit{a capella} chorus “have been part of the standard choral repertory for years,”\footnote{David DeVenney, “The American Choral Tapestry” \textit{Choral Journal} 43, no. 5 (December 2002): 27.} with its three contrasting movements: “The Last Invocation,” “The Unknown Region,” and “To All the Earth.” Schuman believed that this piece, which expresses a mournful, yet hopeful view of death, to be his best choral work.\footnote{Joseph W. Polisi, \textit{American Muse: The Life and Times of William Schuman} (New York: Amadeus Press, 2008), 188–9.}

Howard Hanson maintained a lifelong enthusiasm for Whitman’s poetry, which he set in many works for chorus, including his 1957 \textit{Song of Democracy} for chorus and orchestra; 1970 \textit{The Mystic Trumpeter} for eight-part chorus, narrator, and orchestra; and 1977 \textit{Sea Symphony}, for chorus and orchestra. In all of his Whitman works, Hanson illuminated the idealism and enthusiasm of the poet in a relationship that Walter Simmons summarizes as follows:

Perhaps Whitman’s glorification of the individual and his exuberant identification of himself with the explosion of positive energy that was transforming America during the late 1880s, along with his fervent belief in democracy as the means of unleashing human potential to the fullest, all reverberated with Hanson’s own sense of the America he understood and loved.\footnote{Walter Simmons, \textit{Voices in the Wilderness: Six Neo-Romantic Composers} (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1990), 144.}

Two composers roughly contemporary with Bacon, Schuman, and Hanson who contributed more \textit{choral} Whitman settings than any other composers in the second half of the
twentieth century were Normand Lockwood (1906–2002) and Norman Dello Joio (1913–2008). Lockwood, who, like Hanson, studied with Respighi (1924–1925), was a member of the “Boulangerie” (1925–1928), along with Marc Blitzstein and Roy Harris, and was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome (1929–1932). Following an almost decade-long stay in Europe, Lockwood returned to the United States and began to set Whitman prolifically, producing no fewer than ten settings,5 from his 1936 Dirge for Two Veterans for a capella chorus with soprano solo to his 1962 cantata Elegy for a Hero for chorus. Dello Joio studied with Hindemith at the Berkshire Music Center and at Yale in 1941, and absorbed his teacher’s abiding love for Whitman. Like Hanson, Dello Joio set The Mystic Trumpeter (1945), although Dello Joio’s work is scored for chorus, soprano, tenor, and baritone solos, and a horn that “plays the title role.”6 Dello Joio composed a quartet of Whitman cantatas in the 1960s, including Song of the Open Road (1963) for chorus, trumpet solo, and orchestra; Songs of Walt Whitman (1966) for baritone, chorus, and orchestra; Proud Music of the Storm (1967) for chorus and brass ensemble; and The Year of the Modern (1969) for chorus, brass, and percussion. He scored his last Whitman setting in 1983, As of a Dream, subtitled “A Modern Masque,” for narrator, choir, orchestra, and dancers.7

Vincent Persichetti (1915–1987), who joined the Juilliard faculty in 1947, composed two secular cantatas in the late 1960s on Whitman’s texts: Celebrations (1967) for chorus and wind ensemble, and The Pleiades (1968) for chorus, trumpet, and string orchestra. Although both pieces are of approximately the same duration, Persichetti cast Celebrations in nine-movements.

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7 For a detailed analysis of Dello Joio’s Whitman settings, see Lou Stem Mize, “A Study of Selected Choral Settings of Walt Whitman” (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1967).
which presents as many Whitman poems in a compact, straightforward, and joyful style, while for *The Pleiades* he set only the poem “On the Beach at Night” in an expansive style with the solo trumpet serving “as a symbol of the power of stars to inspire and guide us.”

In the field of art songs for solo voice, Whitman’s influence likewise continued unabated throughout World War II and after. In addition to Bacon’s later settings, Otto Luening (1900–1996) composed three Whitman songs, “Gliding O’er All,” “A Farm Picture,” and “Here the Frailest Leaves of Me,” in 1944, his first year at Columbia. The poems Luening chose generally convey the more pastoral side of Whitman’s work. Elliott Carter (b. 1908) set another pastoral Whitman poem in his extended 1943 song “Warble for Lilac-Time,” which, along with his song settings of Hart Crane and Robert Frost of the same year, exemplifies of the simplified style of Copland’s *Billy the Kid* (1938), “a pattern which many American composers, including Carter, would follow in the next decade.”

Simply put, no composer has contributed more works to the Whitman catalog than Ned Rorem (b. 1923), whose contribution to the field of American art song comprises an inestimable collection. Like Marc Blitzstein, Rorem’s gay identity contributes to his affinity for Whitman, and, like Blitzstein, he has set many of Whitman’s poems with homoerotic themes, most notably “As Adam Early in the Morning” (1957), “Are You the New Person?” (1989), and his three-song set *Three Calamus Poems* (1982). His *Five Poems of Walt Whitman* (composed 1946 and 1957, published 1970) and his masterpiece *War Scenes* (composed 1969, published 1971) emphatically show his pacifism and concern for those who fight in wars. Lawrence Kramer details the political context of *War Scenes* thus, “The cycle expresses the feeling, widespread in the late

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8 DeVenney, “The American Choral Tapestry,” 27.

1960s and early 1970s, that Vietnam had travestied the idea of sacrifice; the young men sent to this war were butchered in a bad cause, and some had become butchers in their turn.”\footnote{Kramer, “Like Falling Leaves: The Erotics of Mourning in Four Drum-Taps Settings,” in \textit{Walt Whitman and Modern Music}, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 158.} Rorem chose Whitman for three of the thirty-six songs in his large-scale cycle \textit{Evidence of Things Not Seen} (1999), as the composer set Whitman in every decade of the second half of the twentieth century. To date, Rorem has composed some two dozen Whitman settings for solo voice, not to mention various cantatas and choral pieces.

Among American composers, a peak in Whitman interest accompanied the celebration of the United States’ bicentennial in 1976. Many composers turned to Whitman, long since established as America’s foremost poet, for inspiration. Often called upon to provide solace in wartime, Americans, weary from political assassinations and the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, once again chose Whitman to be their champion. Roger Sessions, who, like Ernst Bacon, studied with Whitman enthusiast Ernest Bloch, completed his cantata \textit{When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d} in 1974 and dedicated it to the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, both of whom were assassinated while he composed the piece. Along with Paul Hindemith, Sessions has been only the second composer to have made a complete musical setting of \textit{When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d}. Howard Hanson’s final Whitman setting, \textit{A Sea Symphony}, appeared in 1977. Robert Ward, who studied with Hanson at Eastman, composed his \textit{Fifth Symphony: Canticles of America} for orchestra, chorus, soprano and baritone soloists, and optional narrator in 1979, which includes the poem “One Thought Ever at the Fore,” and Samuel Adler incorporated Whitman’s poems “Darest Thou Now, O Soul,” “The Last Invocation,” and “That Music Always Round Me” into his \textit{Sixth String Quartet: A Whitman Serenade} for mezzo-soprano and string quartet (1977). Leonard Bernstein set Whitman in his
1977 work *Songfest* in the movement entitled “To What You Said,” whose theme of homosexual love Bernstein boldly set in the lines “I am he who kisses his comrade lightly on the lips at/parting, and I am one who is kissed in return.” Lukas Foss, who, like Dello Joio, studied with Hindemith at the Berkshire Music Festival and at Yale, composed his *American Cantata* for double chorus, tenor solo, and orchestra for the Bicentennial celebration in 1976. The cantata incorporates texts from Thomas Wolfe, Whitman, Thoreau, and Jefferson, as well as snippets from tourist brochures, political speeches, ecological studies, folksongs, financial journals, nursery rhymes, and other more or less mundane sources into a collage of American images over which Whitman presides.\(^{11}\)

A number of major Whitman settings appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, chief among which is John Adams’s work for baritone and orchestra *The Wound-Dresser* (composed 1988, published 1989). Adams, who studied with Sessions at Harvard, completed his opera *Nixon and China* in 1987 and began work on his operatic portrayal of the violent 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro*, entitled *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), in the year that he published *The Wound-Dresser*. Like his operas, the extended Whitman poem provided Adams with a psychologically intense, violent (in the case of *Klinghoffer*) narrative with which to work and the result is both a gripping, painful reminder of the horrors of war,\(^{12}\) an intimate reflection on the scourge of AIDS, and an homage to those who care for the victims of both.

Lee Hoiby and Richard Pearson Thomas composed Whitman song cycles *I Was There* (1988), five songs for baritone and piano, and *Drum Taps* (1990), four songs for baritone and piano, respectively. Both composers also contributed non-Whitman settings to the *AIDS Quilt*


*Songbook* (published 1993), a collaborative project conceived and organized by baritone William Parker, over which Whitman cast a long shadow, although no composer directly set Whitman in the collection. In addition to the contributions of Whitman devotees Hoiby, Thomas, and Rorem, an interesting song by Chris DeBlasio, entitled “Walt Whitman in 1989,” has become perhaps the most enduring piece from the collection. The poem, written by Perry Brass, suggests how Whitman, who nursed scores of wounded soldiers in the Civil War, would have dealt with the death and agony of the AIDS crisis in the late twentieth century. Sadly, DeBlasio, whose song is also found in the cycle *All the Way Through Evening*, and Parker both died of AIDS the year the *Songbook* was published.¹³

The pieces presented in this Epilogue continue the grand tradition of Whitman settings that began in Britain in the nineteenth century, spread throughout Europe and the United States in the twentieth, and continues to thrive in the twenty-first. Within the second decade of the twenty-first century, the musical and literary communities will celebrate the bicentennial of Whitman’s birth, and these pieces will help us to commemorate America’s finest poet, whose words have inspired readers, listeners, artists, thinkers, dreamers—and composers—for over a century.

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