NARRATING THE LIVES OF SAINTS AND SINNERS
IN SAMUEL BARBER’S *HERMIT SONGS*

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The solitary, peaceful life of a hermit resonated with Samuel Barber. The theme of solitude appears in some of his works, including the *Hermit Songs* and *Despite and Still*, and many of the places where he gathered inspiration or retreated to for comfort were removed from society.¹ A cottage in the Pocono Lake Reserve provided Barber with a sanctuary, a home of rest, during the mid-1900s, and it was called The Hermit.² Even though Barber told his uncle in a letter that he was not actually a hermit, the concept of hermitage clearly appealed to the quieter part of his mind and soul.³

In November of 1952, Samuel Barber wrote to his uncle and role model Sidney Homer to announce that he had found a few early Irish poems that he planned to set to music.⁴ His interest in these poems was the result of a recent trip to Donegal, Ireland, which he had taken to explore some of the places associated with his favorite Irish authors, such as William Butler Yeats and James Joyce.⁵ An admirer of Irish poetry since his childhood, Barber told his uncle that he found the poems he had discovered to be “very direct, unspoiled and often curiously contemporaneous in feeling.”⁶ They were written by Irish monks and scholars in the 8th through 13th centuries in the margins of various types of manuscripts that were being illuminated or copied, and, because they were in Gaelic, Barber had to locate—and, in a few cases, commission—translations into English that he found suitable for his work.⁷ These poems represented a wide variety of subjects,

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² Ibid., 335.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., 334.
⁵ Ibid., 335.
⁶ Quoted in Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 334.
⁷ Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 337.
from the spiritual to the natural to the seemingly mundane, and were, as Barber described them, “not always meant to be seen by [the] Father Superiors.” Poets were heralded in early Ireland, and the education offered by monasteries allowed scholars and the general public alike to learn to write in Gaelic, Latin, and occasionally Greek. This instruction often included the study of verses as a way to absorb languages. Early Irish poetry predates much of the earliest poetry found in any other language.

Along with his letter to Homer, Barber sent the texts to the first four poems he intended to use. These four, which would eventually be parts of a song cycle of ten called *Hermit Songs*, were composed in this order: V. “The Crucifixion,” II. “The Church Bell at Night,” IV. “The Heavenly Banquet,” and I. “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory.” They were composed in November of 1952 over a three-week period, and he took only three weeks more in January of 1953 to complete the cycle. One may think that Barber must have rushed and thrown together the songs haphazardly in order to produce them in only six weeks, and indeed it seems like a very short amount of time to take to create a cycle that would later be considered one of the composer’s greatest achievements. There is evidence, however, that Barber took great care with this work. In fact, compared to the spontaneity with which his other songs were created, *Hermit Songs* was more intentional, as evidenced by the numerous revisions made to much of the content.

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8 Quoted in Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 337.


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 8.

12 Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 337.

13 Ibid.

Hermit Songs was performed for the first time on October 30th, 1953, for the eighty-ninth birthday of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.\textsuperscript{15} Coolidge was the benefactor of the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, the organization that had commissioned Hermit Songs twelve months after Barber began composing the cycle.\textsuperscript{16} At the concert, Leontyne Price sang, and Barber accompanied on the piano.\textsuperscript{17} Price was a soprano from Laurel, Mississippi, who had studied at Julliard and performed in many operas, including Porgy and Bess as Bess.\textsuperscript{18} Barber had great difficulty finding the right singer for the songs, and even as Price began working on them, he was not certain and sought recommendations from colleagues for other available and experienced singers. When he heard Price perform his work, however, he felt more at ease and thought her interpretation to be beautiful.\textsuperscript{19} The pair’s collaboration on this project marked the beginning of a long friendship and professional relationship.

Each of the poems featured in Hermit Songs is intimate in its own way and offers readers a glimpse at the minds of these scholars and early clergymen who dedicated their lives to God. That the verses were written in the corners of texts being copied or illuminated rather than on, for example, sheets of clean paper to keep or share with others suggests that many of them are personal, telling of the authors’ thoughts at that moment, and perhaps at least partially spontaneous. Some of the poems tell stories of saints or of Christ, others express the feelings and experiences of individuals living a spiritual lifestyle—for better and for worse—and still others relay the seemingly mundane (or scandalous) happenings of the authors’ day-to-day lives. As a

\textsuperscript{15} Heyman, Samuel Barber, 340.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 339.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 340.
\textsuperscript{18} Leontyne Price, interview by Peter Dickinson, Samuel Barber Remembered, May 14, 1981, 123.
\textsuperscript{19} Heyman, Samuel Barber, 340.
hermit at heart, Barber may have been drawn to the idea that quiet minds devoted to a life of solitude and prayer could produce such direct and deeply human poetry. By analyzing the *Hermit Songs*, it might be possible to catch a glimpse into Barber’s mind. What all of Barber’s selections have in common is the presence of a narrator, a being whose viewpoint readers temporarily internalize and share. Barber’s musical settings fit the poems perfectly, making the two elements inseparable. The songs’ melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic content are determined by the texts, and they in turn embody the voices found in each of the poems. In his lyrical, romantic style, Barber depicts through music the narrators’ emotions and experiences by using nonfunctional harmony—that is, harmony that does not have a traditional progression—and a syllabic rhythmic structure, and he unifies the song cycle with such common elements as open fifths and parallel fifths.

Three of the ten songs will be analyzed in depth, with an emphasis on how the narrators’ voices are portrayed through harmony, melody, rhythm, and form: I. “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” III. “St. Ita’s Vision,” and VII. “Promiscuity.” These particular songs were chosen because they are together strong representations of the diversity found in the cycle.

**A Brief Biography**

Samuel Barber was born on March 9th, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, a town with a heavy Quaker influence; Barber’s uncle once described the location, saying, “Even the houses seemed to retire behind the massive maple trees. So quiet were the streets that when you walked you walked softly, if you had to speak you spoke softly.” Quoted in Peter Dickinson, “The Formative Years,” in *Samuel Barber Remembered*, ed. Peter Dickinson (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 3.
with a sharp wit.\textsuperscript{21} Sara Barber, his younger sister by three years, was a great supporter as he explored his musical talents.\textsuperscript{22} Barber knew from an early age that he was destined to be a composer. When he was nine years old, he broke the news to his mother in an eloquent letter. He explained that he was never meant to be an athlete, like his parents had wanted, and asked his mother to not shed any tears for him.\textsuperscript{23} His “worrying secret,” as he referred to it, was tearing him apart, to the point that he sometimes grew angry—though “not very”—and he begged his mother not to ignore his revelation and make him play a sport of some kind.\textsuperscript{24} Even though Barber’s mother was herself a musician, she, with her husband, struggled to accept Barber’s realization and the conviction and determination with which he shared it.\textsuperscript{25} It perhaps should have been obvious that Barber would eventually reach this conclusion, however, as he had been composing melodies for years already with his mother at his side. Luckily, what support his parents were initially reluctant to give was made up for by the encouragement Barber was given by his sister and uncle, among others.

At age fourteen, Barber began attending the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he would be the first triple major—piano, composition, and voice—and eventually a member of one of the first graduating classes.\textsuperscript{26} It was there that he studied such things as piano, singing, and

\textsuperscript{21} Heyman, \textit{Samuel Barber}, 7-11.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{24} Quoted in Heyman, \textit{Samuel Barber}, 7.

\textsuperscript{25} Heyman, \textit{Samuel Barber}, 11.

\textsuperscript{26} Ruth C. Friedberg and Robin Fisher, \textit{American Art Song and American Poetry} (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2012), 189.
composition with a number of talented and well-known musicians, including Rosario Scalero and Emilio de Gogorza.\textsuperscript{27}

Later, after graduating from the school, Barber took on a various positions in the music field. He taught at Curtis Institute from 1939 to 1942, but he quickly came to the decision that he did not enjoy teaching and wanted to spend most of his time composing.\textsuperscript{28} In 1943, Barber was drafted into the Army, and due to his bad eyesight he was assigned clerical work for the Air Force.\textsuperscript{29} During this time, he participated in various military ensembles, and he was also commissioned by the Air Force to write his Second Symphony.\textsuperscript{30} Once he was out of the military, he became a full-time composer.

\textit{Reception.} Barber won a number of awards and represented the United States in various settings. Among other achievements, he earned two Pulitzer Prizes and won the Prix de Rome on his second try, and he was vice president of the International Music Council of UNESCO in 1952.\textsuperscript{31} Additionally, he was presented by Harvard with an honorary doctorate in 1959.\textsuperscript{32}

For most of Barber’s career, his music was received well. In 1938, his \textit{Adagio for Strings} (which was a revised movement from his String Quartet in B Minor) and \textit{Essay No. I} were performed by the NBC Symphony Orchestra, with Arturo Toscanini conducting; this event would mark the first time an American composer was featured on the ensemble’s program.\textsuperscript{33}

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\item \textsuperscript{27} Barbara Heyman, “Barber, Samuel,” \textit{Grove Music Online}.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Heyman, “Samuel Barber.”
\item \textsuperscript{29} Felsenfeld, \textit{Britten and Barber: Their Lives and Their Music}, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Heyman, “Samuel Barber.”
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 30.
\end{itemize}
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**Adagio for Strings** is widely recognized and loved by composers and laymen alike—Jean Sibelius openly expressed his admiration for the piece, for example—and it has appeared in films, such as *Platoon*, and over the radio in memory of John F. Kennedy.\(^\text{34}\) His first opera, *Vanessa*, for which Barber received a Pulitzer Prize, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1958, and it received positive reviews, including one from the *New York Times*: “The composer’s confidence grows as he finds that he is not only breathing in the strange world but actually absorbed by it . . . It is wonderful to behold: By the time he has reached the last act Mr. Barber has learned to write for the lyric theatre with perception and impact.”\(^\text{35}\) *Vanessa* remained at that venue for more than two seasons, the second American opera to do so, and it was performed at Salzburg in 1958.\(^\text{36}\) He experienced great success until the premiere of his opera *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is widely considered to have been a disaster. It is speculated that the reason the work was so poorly received was because it was complicated, with sets and props that were difficult to work with and a venue that was new, and the libretto was far from its inspiration, Shakespeare’s play. Leontyne Price, for whom the part of Cleopatra was written, was at one point stuck in the scenery during a song.\(^\text{37,38}\)

*Influences.* Barber had a love for Europe that stayed with him his entire life. His first trip to Europe occurred in the summer of 1928, when he traveled to study with Scalero.\(^\text{39}\) In 1935, he visited Austria and Italy, and while in Vienna he gave recitals that included works he had written

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Leontyne Price, *Samuel Barber Remembered*, 128.

\(^{39}\) Felsenfeld, *Britten and Barber: Their Lives and Their Music*, 46.
himself. He then settled in Italy for a couple of years, where he studied at the American Academy in Rome, an opportunity afforded to him through winning the Prix de Rome award. During his school years, he studied multiple languages, including French. As a result of his interest in Europe, many of the texts for his songs were European, including those for *Hermit Songs*.

Barber’s love of Irish literature began with his family’s housekeeper, Annie Sullivan Brosius, who was sent to the family by Barber’s maternal grandmother. An Irishwoman, Brosius “sang Irish songs, played dances and jigs on the accordion, and told young Sam fairy tales in the kitchen.” She had many songs committed to memory, and even provided the text for the opera Barber wrote at age ten. Over the years, Barber developed a love for many different European authors, including, as aforementioned, Joyce and Yeats.

Sidney Homer, Barber’s uncle and role model, was himself a composer of songs and the husband of a classically trained singer. (One of Barber’s earliest memories, dating from the age of six, was seeing his aunt star in *Aida*; he found the experience mesmerizing.) Homer helped to foster Barber’s musicianship by sending him advice. Homer wrote in a letter that Barber had to develop a taste in music, find a suitable composition teacher, and become proficient in a practical instrument like piano or violin. Homer’s influence can be seen in Barber’s lyrical style, because he “held up the European masters of the 19th century as role models, while at the same

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42 Ibid., 6.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

time directing Barber to trust the validity of his ‘inner voice.’” Homer also persuaded Dr. and Mrs. Barber to send their son to the Curtis Institute, where Barber received his music education. Barber greatly admired his uncle and corresponded with him more consistently than with anyone else throughout his life. He often sought advice pertaining to musical ventures, such as when he sent the texts of the first four *Hermit Songs* to Homer for discussion and approval. Barber admired and studied Homer’s own music, and he edited a collection of Homer’s songs in 1943.

Italian-born Rosario Scalero, Barber’s composition teacher for nine years, was trained in Vienna and held fast to his traditional, conservative musical ideals. Scalero emphasized the importance of learning about music through the study of music—more specifically, by looking at the works of the greats and analyzing why their compositions were so powerful. For instance, when Menotti, Barber’s longtime partner, complained to Scalero that he had never written a fugue before, Scalero replied that Bach was never told how to write a fugue and Menotti would learn through observation and experience. He emphasized form, counterpoint, and harmony in his lessons with Barber. Under Scalero’s tutelage, Barber analyzed the music of Palestrina and Monteverdi, and, after meeting his teacher’s expectations, he was permitted to begin studying 18th- and 19th-century composers.

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46 Heyman, “Samuel Barber.”


51 Felsenfeld, *Britten and Barber: Their Lives and Their Music*, 45.

52 Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 35.
**Style.** Barber’s music is described by many as lyrical and romantic, but conservative. He said in an interview with radio presenter Robert Sherman that he always wrote how he wanted, never giving up his musical identity as a composer and without trying to conform to what was popular for the times.53 His works are proof of this statement. While other composers experimented with harmony and form, Barber “continued to write expressive, lyrical music, using conventional formal models and the tonal language of the 19th century.”54 This may be due in part to the influences of Homer and Scalero, both of whom emphasized the traditions of the 1800s. After the 1940s, Barber began to use more dissonance, chromaticism, and other contemporary techniques, and we see this in *Hermit Songs*, which was written between 1952 and 1953.55 He never allowed these modernist concepts to compromise his works’ lyrical expression, however. *Adagio for Strings* is often used as an example of Barber’s lyricism and his affinity for writing simple, yet emotional, melodies and harmonies. The sustained notes reflect his belief that complexity is secondary to expression.

*Hermit Songs* is an example of Barber’s special affinity for songs. He began writing songs at an early age, and, in fact, half of his output in his first few years as a child composer was songs for piano and voice.56 By his death in 1981, Barber had published nearly forty songs—more than half of his complete list of published works.57 Perhaps Barber recognized early in his life the intimacy of the human voice, and perhaps this is why he was a talented craftsman of songs.

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54 Heyman, “Samuel Barber.”

55 Ibid.


Pity me on my pilgrimage to Loch Derg!
O King of the churches and the bells—
bewailing your sores and your wounds,
but not a tear can I squeeze from my eyes!

Not moisten an eye
after so much sin!
Pity me, O King! What shall I do
with a heart that seeks only its own ease?

Without sorrow or softening in my heart,
bewailing my faults without repenting them!
Patrick the high priest never thought
that he would reach God in this way.

O lone son of Calpurn—since I name him—
O Virgin Mary, how sad is my lot!—
he was never seen as long as he was in this life
without the track of tears from his eyes.

In a narrow, hard, stone-wall cell
I lie after all my sinful pride—
O woe, why cannot I weep a tear!—
and I buried alive in the grave.

On the day of Doom we shall weep heavily,
both clergy and laity;
the tear that is not dropped in time,
none heeds in the world beyond.

I shall have you go naked, go unfed,
body of mine, father of sin,
for if you are turned Hellwards
little shall I reck your agony tonight.

O only begotten Son by whom all men were made,
who shunned not the death by three wounds,
pity me on my pilgrimage to Loch Derg
and I with a heart not softer than a stone!58

“At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” one of the first four of the *Hermit Songs* to be composed and the first presented in the song cycle, was finished on November 13th, 1952. Barber used a translation by Sean O’Faolain from an anthology edited by the translator entitled *The Silver Branch*. Although the poem’s author is anonymous, there is some speculation that it was written by a famous religious Irish poet of the 13th century, Donncladh mor O’Dala. Barber chose and left unchanged the first, second, and eighth verses.

Loch Derg, the location mentioned in the poem, is a popular pilgrimage site in Ireland. Translating to “Red Lake,” it is the island where St. Patrick apparently traveled and experienced profound visions and torment. Pilgrimages have been made to the cave where the incident took place since long before the poem was written. The journey involves three days of fasting and prayer, as well as a long walk without shoes or socks, and it is considered to be one of the hardest in Europe.

In the poem, the narrator despairs over the fact that he is not regretful of the wrongs he has done. He asks for pity from the “King of the churches and the bells,” presumably Jesus Christ, because he has no tears to weep for his sins, of which, the narrator claims, there are many. This is not to say that the narrator does not recognize the crimes he has committed; the poem implies that he is upset about what he has done, but he is not learning from his sins or making up for them through service or a more pious lifestyle—he is not “repenting” for them. Instead, he wishes only to relieve himself of the guilt and discomfort he feels, rather than to


60 Ibid., 9.

61 “The Heart of Lough Derg.”


63 Ibid., line 35.
atonement because he wants to become a better, more Christ-like individual: “What shall I do / with a heart that seeks only its own ease?” By embarking on a pilgrimage to St. Patrick’s Purgatory, he hopes to find forgiveness.

St. Patrick, he says in the fourth stanza, knew that one could not connect with God through a life of sin without proper remorse, and he acted as an example of his teachings by being always in a state of contrition. The narrator goes on to explain that on “the day of Doom we shall weep heavily,” because the time has come to show penitence for sins committed, and those who do not show genuine regret will not be offered sympathy in the afterlife.

In the final stanzas, the narrator begins to hate himself, saying that he will starve and leave naked his body with little concern if it does not allow him to be repentant: “for if you are turned Hellwards / little shall I reck your agony tonight.” The poem ends with the narrator pleading with Jesus Christ to “pity” him and recognizing that he has “a heart not softer than a stone!” He feels that he is cold-hearted and impenetrable, unable to feel proper remorse for the wrongs he has done and have pure, unselfish motives for seeking forgiveness.

Barber’s musical setting of the poem “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory” embodies the narrator’s distress at being unable to feel remorse for his sins. With Barber’s omission of a majority of the poem from his work—again, he used only three of the eight stanzas—the narrator’s despair over his selfishness is emphasized. The accompaniment, which features a repetitive four-note figure.

65 Ibid., line 35.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., lines 27-28.
68 Ibid., line 32.
complicating a bass line of dotted quarters, represents the inner turmoil the narrator is experiencing by creating a busyness that seems ceaseless, almost agitated.

As with all of the *Hermit Songs*, “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory” is lacking a time signature. The bass line implies that the meter is compound duple throughout the song, as it consistently features measures composed of two dotted quarters. Although the voice part is heavily syncopated and contains ties that often cross bar lines and play with off-beats, it does not interfere too greatly with the perception of a six-eight time signature. Also like the other songs in *Hermit Songs*, “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory” is syllabic. Since a syllabic structure allows the melodic line to better imitate speech, it emphasizes the text. Each stanza is given importance and portrayed in a way similar to how the author might speak it, unsullied by long, flashy melismas.

The song appears to be through-composed for the majority of its length, but the melodic material from the opening statement returns in m. 31, and the melodic and harmonic content of mm. 12-15 reappears in mm. 37 to the end.

The song has been broken up into sections for the sake of the analysis.

*First verse (mm. 1-15).* In this section, the narrator is asking for pity from Jesus Christ as he embarks on his pilgrimage to Lough Derg. He is calm at first, but he grows desperate and sorrowful as the music progresses, reaching out to his savior and pleading with him. The mood is C# Dorian and contains five sharps; the Dorian mode is a major scale with flatted third and seventh scale degrees, and it is the second of seven modes that were created in the medieval era. The tonic is difficult to hear, but evidence for it can be found in the bass line, which provides a chord progression of v - i. The song begins at a *forte* dynamic for both the accompaniment and the melody as the narrator asks for pity as he travels to St. Patrick’s Purgatory. The melodic line
is syncopated and contains numerous ties that often stretch into following measures, which makes the meter difficult to find.

For this section—and much of the rest of the song—the bass line of the accompaniment consists of “quasi-archaic” open-fifths (Figure 1). As will be revealed, “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory” is not the only song in *Hermit Songs* to contain this feature. The lack of a third makes the quality of the chord ambiguous, because the third is what determines whether a chord is major or minor. Open fifths were used in medieval music and can create an empty, lost sound. Parallel fifths also appear frequently throughout this section: the chords in the bass move up or down, often by a fourth (or an inverted fifth), to create yet another open-fifth. Consecutive perfect intervals were commonplace in music before the 14th century, but composers avoided them during the Renaissance and thereafter. Barber may have used open fifths and parallel fifths in part because they were used when the poems were written. Putting a modern twist on medieval characteristics may have been his way of setting the stage for *Hermit Songs*, including “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory.” Perhaps more importantly, though, the lost aesthetic the open-fifths provide portray the narrator’s despair, creating a sound that is neither inherently major nor minor, happy nor sad, to give the impression that the narrator is unable to make sense of his feelings.

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** The accompaniment features open fourths and fifths that move in parallel motion. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” in *Hermit Songs* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1954), 3.

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The open-fifth chords in the bass always follow a pattern in which their leaps alternate directions. Never do they create an ascending or descending line; instead, there are two in each measure, the first lower than the second, and a jump of a fourth or greater stands between them. These incomplete chords provide a background for the moving line in the right-hand of the accompaniment. They almost imitate walking, like the narrator is on his way to the cave of St. Patrick’s torment; they can also be interpreted as the rocking of a boat on choppy waters as the narrator travels to the island where St. Patrick’s Purgatory is located. In m. 9, both of the open chords have a doubled root, causing the sound to become broader, more demanding, as if the narrator’s emotions are growing.

A four-note figure (Figure 2) appears in the right-hand of the accompaniment for this section and a majority of the song: F#4, C#4, G#4, and D#4. (There is an A4 written in as a grace note before the F#4.) It is composed of perfect fourths and fifths, and it repeats ceaselessly, without changing. This repetition is not uncomfortable at first, but as the desperation in the melodic line grows and the chords in the bass line become broader, it begins to indicate the distress and restlessness of the narrator. The open intervals that it outlines create, like the open-fifths discussed above, an ancient, empty sound. As notes in the figure clash with the melodic line, the music depicts the narrator’s confliction between wanting to be absolved of his sins and knowing his desire for inner peace is selfish.
The repeating four-note figure complicates the meter, which, as discussed above, appears to be duple-compound. It does not fit neatly into the six-eight meter, skewing the compound duple bass line, and it is even barred in groups of four in the beginning and middle of the song, causing the beams to reach over bar lines. In the second half of m. 11, the beaming of the notes changes and the four-note figure is grouped in threes. The order of the notes remains the same, so the groups change with each set, but the repetition is never broken. The reason for this change may be to make way for the quarter notes that arrive, complicating the implied time signature by bringing further attention to the off-beats. These quarter notes create a hemiola (Figure 3), or three against two. They disappear in m. 16.
In m. 12, when the hemiola comes into play, the narrator is lamenting that he is unable to weep for his sins, and the accompaniment features a few changes. The dynamic in the accompaniment drops to piano, reflecting the sorrow felt by the narrator. As described briefly above, quarter notes double every other note of the four-note figure and appear on beats one, three, and five, creating a subtle hemiola and confusing the meter. The dotted-quarters in the bass line return to the chord progression from the first few measures of the song (G#-minor to C#-major, or minor five to major one in Roman numerals), but now the interval between them is roughly three octaves large. In fact, the chords alternate staves: the chord on the first beat is written in bass clef, and the chord on the second beat is written in treble clef. This change creates a sense of vulnerability as the accompaniment reaches into the depths of the instrument’s lower register, then leaps into the more sensitive upper register, and it emphasizes the pain the narrator is experiencing.

*Second stanza (mm. 16-26).* This section contains many of the same features discussed in the first stanza. The four-note figure persists into m. 26, and for a while the bass line from the first few measures of the song reappears, with open-fifth chords alternating between G#-minor and C#-major and, consequently, parallel fifths. The section begins with a continuation of the narrator’s lamenting, and he exclaims that he cannot cry a single tear, even after everything he has done. Piano is still the dynamic marking, but a crescendo gives the melodic line more intensity.

In m. 19, the narrator asks for pity again, and the dynamic jumps from piano to forte. This change is accompanied by a marking of poco, requesting a little more drive and intensity. For a moment, the narrator pleads desperately again, this time with more fervor than before. A key change also occurs in m. 19, and accidentals introducing B# and E# to the key signature
indicate that the new key is A#-minor. This analysis is also supported by the bass line, which features a E#-minor chord moving to an A#-minor chord—or, rather, V moving to I, as in the first few measures of the song.

The dynamic softens again when the narrator asks what he should do about his selfishness. The melodic line is heavily syncopated and moves in thirds before descending in step-wise motion. A quadruplet raises the melody by thirds again until it reaches C# and lowers by a half-step to B#.

Third stanza (mm. 27-41). At measure m. 27, when the narrator begins pleading with Christ again—“O only begotten Son by whom all men were made”—the accompaniment changes completely (Figure 4).70 The key changes from seven sharps, or A#-minor, to one flat, D-minor, and is introduced by the rewriting of the B# as a C in the previous measure. The four-note figure that was previously in the right-hand of the accompaniment jumps to the melody and is replaced by polychords. On beat one of this six-eight measure, the accompaniment features an implied G-major chord clashing against an implied D-minor chord, but both of them are missing thirds. On the next beat, another set of open-fifths is written, this time an unfinished F-major over an unfinished C-major. These can be considered chords rather than intervals because the root or fifth is doubled for each. The measure that follows contains the same material, the same four chords. From m. 29 to m. 30, Barber uses quintal chords, or chords composed entirely of fifths (Figure 5). The resulting sound is dissonant, portraying the increasing agony of the narrator as he grows more desperate and hopeless. Because the quintal chords are composed of open-fifths, they not only clash, but they are also ambiguous, empty, both agitating the listener and making him wary. They do not have a definite quality—they are neither major nor minor—and

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so they do not tell the listener how he should feel, although they are arguably unsettling. They also lead into the climactic second plea by the narrator for pity from Christ.

![Figure 4](image1.png)

**Figure 4.** The accompaniment changes completely with the second verse. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” 4.

![Figure 5](image2.png)

**Figure 5.** The accompaniment for the second verse features polychords and quintal chords. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” 5.

As aforementioned, the four-note figure that was previously in the accompaniment moves to the melodic line in m. 27. The notes are written as declarative, beamless eighth notes, and, up until m. 30, the passage is completely syllabic. This transference of material in the accompaniment to the melodic line makes the transition into the new key signature feel seamless. The bold nature of the melodic line in this part of the verse conjures an image of the narrator on his hands and knees, asking the Lord to take pity on him and grant him peace.
In m. 31, when the narrator asks for pity for a third and final time, material from the first two sections returns in the original key, C# Dorian. As seen in Figure 6, the four-note figure reappears, but the whole pattern is an octave higher, and the G#4 is doubled an octave below. Also, the eighth notes on the first, third, and fifth beats are doubled with a quarter note, creating the hemiola from earlier. The bass line mirrors the content from the beginning of the song, except the G#-minor chord is written an octave lower. The melodic line also mimics the material from the song’s first few measures, both in pitches and in syncopated rhythms. There is a little more chaos this time, precipitated by the presence of the hemiola and the lower, darker bass line, and this reflects the narrator’s desperation at its peak.

![Figure 6](image_url)

*Figure 6.* The four-note figure returns, with alterations. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” 5.

The final line at m. 37—“and I with a heart not softer than a stone”—is piano, reflecting the narrator’s sorrowful admission that he is unmovable. The four-note figure returns to its original state just a few measures before, causing the accompaniment to become slightly quieter and more serene, and it remains this way until the song’s end. In m. 37, as the melodic line reenters with the same material as mm. 12-15, the three-octave jumps between the G#-minor and C#-major open-fifth chords come back. A sense of sorrow and helplessness takes hold, as the

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song becomes softer than ever before. “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory” ends with a sustained open-fifth in the bass line of the accompaniment in mm. 40-41 that is joined and eventually replaced by a quartal chord in the last half of m. 40. The quartal chord is outlined in the last four notes in the right-hand of the accompaniment, all but the final of which have grace notes. The song’s ending is quiet and, finally, still, as the narrator resigns himself to a life of unrest and disapproval from his savior.

“In St. Ita’s Vision”

“I will take nothing from my Lord,” said she,  
“unless He gives me His Son from Heaven  
In the form of a Baby that I may nurse Him.”
So that Christ came down to her  
in the form of a Baby and then she said:  
“Infant Jesus, at my breast,  
Nothing in this world is true  
Save, O tiny nursling, You.  
Infant Jesus, at my breast,  
By my heart every night,  
You I nurse are not  
A churl but were begot  
On Mary the Jewess by Heaven’s Light.  
Infant Jesus; at my breast,  
what King is there but You who could  
Give everlasting Good?  
wherefore I give my food.  
Sing to Him, maidens, sing your best!  
There is none that has such right  
to your song as Heaven’s King  
Who every night  
Is Infant Jesus at my breast.”

Barber finished “St. Ita’s Vision,” which appears third in the song cycle, on January 9th, 1953. The poem, which may have been written in the 8th or 9th century, was translated by Chester Kallman following a request by Barber. Although Barber “undoubtedly read Whitley

73 Heyman, Samuel Barber, 337.
Stokes’s six-stanza translation in *The Silver Branch,* seeing as he selected other translations from the collection, he apparently “found it unsatisfactory for a musical setting.” Kallman’s interpretation is simpler and more rhythmically stable than Stokes’s; for example, a line in Stokes’s translation reads, “‘Jesukin, nursed by me in my little hermitage,’” while Kallman’s translation of the same line is slightly more colloquial with, “‘Infant Jesus at my breast.’”

St. Ita was a nun from the 6th century who left her noble lifestyle to found a church in modern-day Killeedy, Ireland. She lived as a virgin and preached the importance of devotion to the Holy Trinity. Many women flocked to her church and gave themselves to God, and in addition to nurturing these followers’ spirituality, St. Ita is credited with a number of miracles, including bringing a man back to life so that he could father a child. The story about St. Ita asking to nurse Jesus as an infant and receiving her wish in a vision was discovered in the Martyrology of Oengus, perhaps in the form of the poem above, and it is likely fiction. It was not uncommon for religious women to make requests similar to St. Ita’s.

In this poem, St. Ita asks God to let her hold and nurse the baby Jesus. She is granted her wish, and once he is in her arms, she praises him, saying that out of everything in the world, only he is “true.” He is “by [her] heart every night,” both metaphorically—as in, she feels great love

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77 Ibid., 197.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 198.
81 Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” in *Hermit Songs,* line 7.
for him—and, perhaps now that he has been given to her, physically. She goes on to tell the infant that he is not a “churl,” or a peasant, but rather he is a king who will bring “everlasting” goodness to the world. This is high praise and expectations for a child who is so young that he is still being nursed. St. Ita then commands “maidens,” perhaps her virgin followers, to sing to the baby, and she finishes by saying that no one is more worthy of being ruler of Heaven than Jesus.

The narrator in this poem appears to be disembodied and omnipresent, as he tells the story of St. Ita in the third person point of view without personal opinion; however, considering the intimate nature of the poem, it is not difficult to picture a monk, perhaps the author, or another spiritual individual relaying the tale to close peers. With this image in mind, one can imagine the drama and emotion with which the narrator speaks, embodying St. Ita as she first pleads with God to let her nurse the baby Jesus and later showers on him her adoration and knowledge of the greatness to come once he is in her arms.

Barber’s musical setting of “St. Ita’s Vision” begins direct and declamatory, with St. Ita asking God to send her Jesus as an infant. Then, when God fulfills her request, St. Ita begins singing a lullaby to Jesus, and, in the accompaniment, gentle three-note figures create a flowing aesthetic. The scene can easily be pictured upon hearing Barber’s interpretation of the poem: St. Ita sitting in a chair by a window with the holy infant in her arms, the stars illuminating her figure and enveloping the baby in a celestial glow. Her desire to nurse the child Jesus and her eternal devotion to him are both felt in “St. Ita’s Vision.” The song is more tonal than “At St.

83 Ibid., lines 11-16.
84 Ibid., lines 16-22.
Patrick’s Purgatory,” with minimal dissonance, especially in the aria, to further drive the lullaby aesthetic.

“St. Ita’s Vision” is written as a recitative and aria. A recitative is a section that imitates speech, and it is often followed by an aria, as it is in this song, which is more lyrical in nature. The recitative occurs in mm. 1-4. The melody is entirely syllabic and is composed almost entirely of eighth-notes. However, the note values matter little, as it is easy for the singer to take her time: only sustained half-notes or quarter-notes accompany her. Also, Barber hints at the phrasing that he desires by making the first measure long—just over twenty beats long. The aria begins at m. 5 and instantly takes on a sweeter tone.

Recitative (mm. 1-4). In this beginning section, St. Ita asks God to send her Jesus as an infant so that she can nurse him. As with the other Hermit Songs, “St. Ita’s Vision” is devoid of a time signature. This becomes especially apparent in the recitative, whose first measure is just over twenty beats long and spans the first three lines of the poem (Figure 7). One gets the sense that there is not intended to be a clear and steady meter in this section, as the singer, who has the moving line, is tasked with determining the pace.

![Figure 7](image)

**Figure 7.** The song begins with a speech-like recitative. *Source: Samuel Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” 7.*

The recitative travels through a number of different keys. The initial key signature contains neither flats nor sharps, and the tonic is ambiguous. At the end of the first measure of the recitative, pitches in a B-major scale accumulate to create a pronounced B-major chord that is
tripled so that it spans both staves in the accompaniment (Figure 8). In m. 2, a new key signature with three flats appears, and for that measure the key is E-flat major. Then a flatted D in m. 3 causes another modulation to occur, this time to Db major, and the recitative finishes in that key, although the tonic becomes harder to find. The various modulations support the syllabic rhythmic structure in creating a speech-like melodic line, unhindered by constraints of a single, rigid key signature.

![Figure 8](image)

**Figure 8.** The first measure of the recitative ends with a B-major chord. Source: Samuel Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” 7.

The accompaniment does not move much in this section in order to emphasize the melodic line’s importance and give it free reign. A majority of the melodic line in the recitative is composed of eighth notes to give the impression that the singer is speaking. However, triplets are used a few times to keep the tempo slow and easy; of the three times triplets are used, two of them appear over “form of a [Baby],” perhaps to emphasize the fact that Christ is an infant.\(^{85}\) Also in the recitative, a fermata is placed at the end of each line for the first three lines of the poem, and then at the end of the final two lines in the section. Pitch-wise, the melody is composed from intervals of seconds, thirds, and fourths, and it sounds uninhibited to imitate speech.

\(^{85}\) Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” in *Hermit Songs*, lines 1-5.
The song begins with a large, demanding quintal chord in the accompaniment, a half-rest before the melodic line enters, to depict St. Ita’s fervent determination as she makes her request to nurse the baby Jesus and says she will take nothing else until it is fulfilled (Figure 9). The first half of the recitative features many ninth-chords, including a chord after the first fermata in m. 1 that outlines a ninth chord, but is missing a third and seventh and is written as a quartal chord hovering above a quintal chord. The first measure ends with a B-major chord that sweetens the recitative as St. Ita says that she wants Jesus to be sent to her as an infant. From m. 2 until the end, the accompaniment contains some open fifths, but unlike in “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” these chords are filled in with notes located elsewhere in the staves. The most movement occurs in the final measure of the recitative, where eighth notes lead the open fifths to a E-flat major chord.

Figure 9. The recitative begins with a quintal chord. Source: Samuel Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” 7.

Aria (mm. 5-19). In the aria, St. Ita begins singing a lullaby to Jesus, in which she says that he is the only truth and is fully good. The key signature from the end of the recitative carries over into the aria, and now the key is F Dorian. Modulations to C Dorian appear for brief periods, as in m. 11 when the A-flat is raised. The dynamic markings indicate piano throughout.

In the aria’s melodic line, the tied eighth notes that often occur on the down-beats of the duple-compound measures are attached to one syllable of text, breaking tradition with Barber’s
otherwise syllabic setting (Figure 10). This change causes the speech to now sound more like cooing, as one might do with an infant. The melody moves predominantly in thirds and fourths. It rises with fifths to create a sort of swell that eventually falls again with the thirds and fourths, as seen in the first measure of the aria, which features an interval of a third followed by an upward fifth.

![Musical notation](image)

**Figure 10.** The cycle’s syllabic trend pauses temporarily. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” 8.

Once the aria begins, a compound duple meter can be felt in the music from the dotted quarter notes in the bass line and the figures in the right-hand of the accompaniment, which contain three eighth notes. All of the lines sound in agreement with this unspecified time signature for the majority of the song. However, the meter changes abruptly to duple-simple in certain measures to emphasize the lyrics. For example, in m. 7, when St. Ita states “Nothing in this world is true,” the bass line switches to straight quarters before ending with a half note and the melodic line is purely syllabic (Figure 11).86

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The bass line of the accompaniment features on-the-beat chords for this section of the aria and a majority of the song and provides a gentle background for the flowing eighth notes in the right-hand. Like in “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” the bass-line chords are more accurately described as open-fifths, as they are usually missing a third. They move in parallel fifths, both voices leaping by the same amount (often a fourth or a fifth) in the same direction to create a long series of empty fifths. As mentioned in the analysis of “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” open-fifths and parallel fifths were used often in early music. Unlike “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” however, the third of the implied chord occasionally appears in the melodic line or the right-hand of the accompaniment in some way, even if only as a fleeting eighth note.

The right-hand of the accompaniment consists of ascending three-note figures of eighth notes (Figure 12). They are gentle and flowing, and they create a sense of serenity and calm as St. Ita sings a loving lullaby to the holy infant in her arms. The intervals between the eighth notes in the figures differ. For example, in m. 6, the figures outline open fifths with doubled roots, but in the next measure they move largely in thirds. The figures are diatonic, except for the A-natural that occurs occasionally to create a brief modulation to C Dorian.
Figure 12. The accompaniment features ascending eighth-note figures for the first half of the aria. Source: Samuel Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” 8.

In m. 15, the melodic line is syllabic again and the meter appears to be three-four. The open-fifth dotted-quarters in the bass line are replaced with eighth notes that land on the up-beats. The resulting sound is still sweet, but one gets the impression that St. Ita is interrupting her lullaby to make a comment about the infant’s purity and goodness.

Aria (20-44). In this section of the aria, St. Ita says that Jesus is the only king who can bring peace and goodness to the world. The key is still F Dorian. The melodic material from mm. 5-11 returns, and crescendos and a dynamic marking of mezzo forte at m. 24 give it continual growth.

The bass line contains open-fifths, as it did previously, except in m. 21 where a seventh chord is outlined and followed by a quintal chord. In m. 22, the melodic line is doubled above the open-fifths, and this continues until m. 26. The resulting sound is broader, fitting of a king who is meant to do amazing things in his lifetime.

In m. 20, the third time “Infant Jesus, at my breast” is sung, the eighth notes in the accompaniment are replaced by sixteenth notes (Figure 13). They ascend in one measure and descend in the next, alternating for several bars in a row until, right before the climax in m. 30, they continue to climb for two consecutive measures. They descend again, then ascend while a
new line of descending sixteenth notes appears in the bass line so that the two are splitting, traveling apart from each other. Throughout all of these measures, every other eighth note is joined by a fourth. The sound that this part of the accompaniment creates resembles twinkling, like stars on a cool night, the sparkle in an infant’s eyes, or the glittering of the Heavens.

Figure 13. Sixteenth-note lines descend and ascend, and every other note is joined by a fourth. Source: Samuel Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” 9.

The climax occurs in m. 30 with a dynamic marking of forte and a preceding crescendo that calls for the accompaniment to grow gradually louder. The build that comes before m. 30—the descending sixteenth-notes that split and move in contrary motion, as described above—involves a modulation to C major, creating a cheerful sound that might evoke images of angels or holy women gathering and celebrating (Figure 14). This is fitting because the next line of text depicts St. Ita calling to maidens, perhaps the virgins in her care, and asking them to sing for the infant. When m. 30 arrives, the accompaniment features grace-note arpeggios that lead into the dotted-quarter chords that span both staves. The sound this creates is grand as St. Ita calls for Jesus to be praised in song. In m. 31, an even larger arpeggio creates a disjointed F Dorian scale and accumulates to create a tall chord (Figure 15).
In m. 32, the key signature contains three flats again, but the key is ambiguous. The accompaniment contains seventh chords in third inversion, and there are open-fifths in the bass. These chords occur on each note; in m. 32, the meter is simple triple, but the compound meter returns after that. The resulting sound is demanding to reflect St. Ita’s fierce love and loyalty as she says that Jesus is the only being fit to receive the song of praises sung by the maidens. In m. 35, the boldness and grandeur of the previous measures winds down with sixteenth notes that climb from the bass clef into the upper register of the treble clef. They plateau and decrescendo there, dancing around G5. The melodic line at m. 38 creates a hemiola through quarter notes that
contradict the compound duple meter in the accompaniment, and the legato feeling that results creates a tenderness fitting for St. Ita’s last words to baby Jesus.

With one last address to the infant Jesus, the song grows soft again, and the three-note figures return to the accompaniment. The tonic is F, meaning that F Dorian reigns once more. Open-fifths a dotted half-note in length fill the bass line with soft sound; in many of the measures, the root of the interval is doubled an octave above. At m. 42, a dynamic of pianissimo is marked, and the eighth notes in the accompaniment create jagged hills rather than ascending lines. These eighth notes outline a quintal and quartal chord simultaneously because two pitches occur on every other eighth note (Figure 16). The pitches appear in this order: A-flat clashing against a B-flat, E-flat, and another A-flat and B-flat sharing the same space. Open-fifths appear between the A-flat, E-flat, and B-flat; at the same time, open-fourths awaken between the B-flat, E-flat, and A-flat. This creates subtle dissonance. Here, the lullaby takes an almost somber turn, as St. Ita’s lullaby nears its end and the infant Jesus is, perhaps, falling asleep.

![Figure 16](image)

**Figure 16.** The eighth notes outline a quintal and quartal chord simultaneously. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “St. Ita’s Vision,” 10.

In the second-to-last measure, the bass line contains a quintal chord, and the eighth notes in the right-hand of the accompaniment outline a quartal chord. The song ends with a large, but
quiet, quintal chord, which was already sustained in the bass line, as St. Ita’s lullaby ends. The softness portrays the tenderness St. Ita feels, and the ambiguity of the mode, neither major nor minor, neither happy nor sad, creates a slight solemnity. St. Ita has been given the chance to share with the infant all that she wanted, and she knows that many heavy—but great—things lay ahead for him.

“Promiscuity”

I do not know with whom Edan will sleep, but I do know that fair Edan will not sleep alone.87

Barber completed “Promiscuity,” which is presented seventh in the song cycle, on January 15th, 1953.88 He found the poem in Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson’s *A Celtic Miscellany* and used the translation word-for-word.89 Jackson “translated it almost literally, as prose.”90 The epigram is thought to have been written in the ninth century, but its author is unknown.91

In this short text, Edan, presumably a male, is discovered by the narrator with an unknown companion. The name “Edan” means “‘fire’ or ‘flame,’” and it has been spelled differently or, even, assigned a different gender in other translations.92 Given the subject matter—a promiscuous encounter—the name seems intentional, a technique to further drive the image of a man with lustful motivations. If Edan is a monk, a rational assumption to make, the epigram becomes all the more scandalous. It is easy to envision a monk, who is supposed to


88 Heyman, *Samuel Barber*, 337.


90 Ibid.


devote his life to prayer, study, work, and, perhaps, celibacy, skulking about the monastery with an unknown other.

Barber’s musical setting of “Promiscuity” paints a picture. The monastery halls are quiet, dim, with only the moonlight spilling light through the windows and onto the floor. All of the monks have gone to bed—except two. The narrator is hiding, peeking silently around the corner to spy on his fellow brother, who is tip-toeing through the hallway with an unfamiliar, dark figure in tow. Barber’s interpretation of the epigram gives it an air of secrecy, playing on the hushed, gossip-like tone already implied without music.

Barber did not give the song a key signature, but there are accidentals written in throughout the piece. If one were to collect all of the pitches, they would find these notes: C#, D#, E, E#, F, G#, A, B, and C. Together, without excluding any of them, they do not fit cleanly into a scale, and the tonic can be difficult to pinpoint. However, C# appears to be the tonic, as evidenced by the large, unmistakable C# major chord at the singer’s last fermata in m. 7 and the implied C# major chord at the end of the song. (The way the chord is written out is misleading: using the enharmonic equivalents of F and Ab—E# and G#, respectively—reveals the third and fifth scale degree of C# major. There is a strong pull toward the pitch of C#.)

The song begins at forte, with the author’s declaration that he does not know who will share Edan’s bed. Then, when the narrator says Edan will not be sleeping alone, the melodic line is given the dynamic of piano, and the song as a whole grows softer, ending in pianissimo. These changes in volume imply that the narrator is excited about his new-found secret, yet recognizes that it is still just that—a secret.

Since “Promiscuity” is only ten measures in length, the analysis will be divided by element.
Harmony. As seen in Figure 17, the accompaniment begins with two syncopated figures—an eighth-note interval attached to a half-note interval by slur markings. A fermata hovers above each of the eighth notes. As indicated by the piano pedal markings, the half note is sustained until the breath marks are observed. A slight break, perhaps more like a lift, separates the two figures. This introduction may evoke images of a door creaking open as a curious monk pokes his head out of his room and begins traveling stealthily through a dimly-lit hallway.

Figure 17. The setting begins with two syncopated figures. Source: Samuel Barber, “Promiscuity,” in *Hermit Songs* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1954), 18.

Although the accompaniment features moving eighth notes, it sounds almost barren, like tip-toes in a (mostly) deserted hallway. When the melodic line enters, the right hand of the accompaniment doubles it. Meanwhile, in the same staff, a different repetitious four-note pattern moves in contrary motion to the melody, creating counterpoint: F, E, C#, and D#, in the order that they appear (Figure 18). (This pattern will be referred to as Pattern B, for the sake of clarity.) When the melody descends, the pattern in the accompaniment ascends, and vice versa. This creates an interesting sound where the two voices come together to form a major third every four eighth notes before traveling away from each other again. These three lines may represent the
three pairs of feet sneaking through the hall—the narrator’s (in the melodic line), and Edan’s, and his guest’s (in the accompaniment). The bass line contains low, dark intervals of an octave that are meant to be sustained until the next octave appears. The resulting lingering of the pitches creates a haunting aesthetic, like echoes in an empty narrow hall.

![Figure 18](image1.png)

**Figure 18.** The melodic line is doubled in the accompaniment, and a second four-note pattern appears beneath it. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “Promiscuity,” 18.

When the melodic line disappears, the accompaniment sounds different, but it in fact contains the same pitches in the same order. Both the four-note pattern in the melodic line and the four-note pattern added in the accompaniment return, taking up both staves (Figure 19). (The bass clef becomes a treble clef halfway through m. 3.) This time, however, the melody jumps to the upper register, and every other note in Pattern B leaps up an octave, causing the line to hop around the staff.

![Figure 19](image2.png)

**Figure 19.** Both patterns continue in the singer’s absence, now in different octaves. *Source:* Samuel Barber, “Promiscuity,” 18.
The singer returns in the second half of m. 5. Again the melody is doubled in the accompaniment. Pattern B appears in its original form, without the large leaps, and moves in contrary motion to the melodic line, but it has been altered slightly. With the exception of the first note, the four-note pattern drops the E and turns into a three-note pattern: C#, D#, F, in the order that they appear. It no longer moves in strictly contrary motion; now it is an ascending figure. Because of this, the intervals between the melody and the counterpoint change and grow more dissonant. The new intervals include a diminished eighth, an augmented second, and a diminished fifth (or a tritone). The large intervals in the lower register of the bass line appear again, although this time they arrive a little earlier than before, and all of them are a quarter note in length.

When the singer drops out for the last time, the melody and second pattern continue in the accompaniment, just as before. Both of the patterns retain the recent alterations (i.e., the additional B in the melodic line and the missing E in the lower voice). As it did previously, the counterpoint jumps around the staff, except now it does so with more variation, and each pitch alternates between the lower octave and the higher octave. In these measures, the narrator is watching Edan and his pair with curious eyes as they tread quietly down the hallway.

“Promiscuity” ends as it begins, with two syncopated figures (Figure 20). The sustained half note in the first figure features heavy dissonance in the form of a C clashing against a C#. The song closes in major, however, as the second figure moves from an interval of a minor sixth to the third and fifth of an implied C# major chord. In this closing measure, the narrator is slipping back into his room and closing the door behind him, leaving Edan and his guest be.
Figure 20. Rhythmically, the piece ends in the same way as it began. Source: Samuel Barber, “Promiscuity,” 18

Melody. The melodic material of the melody line consists of four notes. These pitches are, in the order Barber used them, A4, C5, B4, and G#4, and they occur in this sequence two and a half times. The melodic line is composed almost entirely of intervals of a minor third and a minor second. In the first section of text—“I do not know with whom Edan will sleep”—the minor thirds and minor seconds alternate. They also move in a zigzag-like pattern, switching directions every third note beginning with the singer’s second note.

The melodic material for the second line of text is exactly like the first, except for one difference. After the fourth note, the four-note pattern does not repeat, but instead is interrupted by another B4 (Figure 21). As the B4 steps down to an A4 and the four-note set begins again, the alteration introduces an interval of a major second to the otherwise consistent pattern of alternating minor thirds and minor seconds.

93 “Promiscuity,” 131.
Figure 21. The melodic line and Pattern B feature a slight alteration when the singer returns. Source: Samuel Barber, “Promiscuity,” 18.

Rhythm. The melodic line is entirely syllabic and consists of all eighth notes, with the exception of the half notes at the end of each phrase. Eighth notes dominate the accompaniment, as well. The beat in “Promiscuity” is elusive, and the meter, as indicated by the bar lines, changes frequently, yet is consistently difficult to name. Unlike “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory” and “St. Ita’s Vision,” which have strong leanings toward particular time signatures, “Promiscuity” seems more at the will of the singer and accompanist.

Initially, the beat sounds as if it is a quarter note in length. The first measure technically contains six quarter-note beats, but most of it is improvised by the accompanist, so counting is difficult; the rhythms allow for plenty of room for interpretation, and so the pianist gets a miniature solo. When the melody enters, the first note sounds like an anacrusis, and the second note sounds like the first downbeat, even though it appears on paper to be part of the pick-up. Because the beat seems to be a quarter-note long, it lands on the up-beats of the following measure (m. 2). The uneven number of beats in m. 2 (there are seven eighth notes, or three and a half quarter-note beats) allows the beat to fall on the down-beat of m. 3 again. The quarter-note beat is difficult to find after m. 3, and it suddenly appears as though Barber did not intend for it to be located.
The meter is hard to pinpoint without a clear beat. The dominating presence of eighth notes contradicts the theory about the quarter-note beat. Additionally, dotted lines in mm. 2, 4, 6, and 8 indicate the subdivision of the bars, supporting the notion that the beat is actually an eighth note in length and the mentioned measures are in seven-eight time. An eighth-note beat does not feel appropriate, however, as the changes in tempo and the fluid motion of the song make it difficult to tap, too. The supposed seven-eight bars appear every other measure throughout the entire song, and the eighth notes are grouped as four plus three. The other measures change meters frequently, but naming said meters seems to be unimportant and unproductive since there is no steady beat.

Form. Where form is concerned, “Promiscuity” is almost symmetrical. The song ends in the same way that it begins, with two syncopated figures. Additionally, the material in the melodic line and the lines that accompany it are roughly the same for both halves of the text. The piano parts between the lines of prose and between the last line of prose and the end of the song are strikingly similar. Considering its length, which makes it difficult to identify strophes, the song appears to be through-composed.

Conclusion

Samuel Barber’s *Hermit Songs* depicts various stories. In the three examples above alone, one enters the mind of a monk struggling to repent for his sins, witnesses through an omnipresent narrator the touching lullaby sung by St. Ita to the infant Jesus, and sneaks through quiet hallways with a silent observer to spy on another’s promiscuous escapades. The poems reveal much about their subjects, but Barber brings them to life through his settings. Not only does he express the narrators’ emotions through music, but he also depicts the narrators’ surroundings, the settings in which each of the stories takes place. In “At St. Patrick’s Purgatory,” Barber
portrayed the choppy waters surrounding the island of Lough Derg through the open-fifths in the bass line. The twinkling of the stars and heavens illuminated the accompaniment in “St. Ita’s Vision.” The empty hallways and stealthy characters in “Promiscuity” were implied in the barren, tip toe-like eighth notes that appeared throughout the song. Separately, the musical material and poems are interesting, but together they breathe life into the poems the Irish monks and scholars wrote centuries ago.

Barber uses a number of techniques to accomplish this. Non-functional harmony, for one, is seen throughout all three of the songs discussed above. Rather than using traditional progressions for Hermit Songs, Barber opted for harmony that best fit the lines of the poems as they appeared in the music. Open fifths and parallel fifths, for example, obscure the tonality of the songs and depict the oftentimes complicated emotions of the narrators. The use of syllabic rhythms is also a prominent feature of Hermit Songs. By choosing not to use time signatures, Barber had the freedom to match note values to the text however he wanted—and, in a way, he gave that freedom to the singers, too. Especially in St. Ita’s recitative, the syllabic nature of the songs and the missing time signatures allow the performers to take some liberty with expression.

Hermit Songs contains many elements of Barber’s style. Barber’s lyricism is present in the songs’ melodic lines. “St. Ita’s Vision” is perhaps the most obvious example of this: the steady melodic line in the aria features intervals of thirds, fourths, and fifths that are constructed in a way that creates smooth swells—that rise and fall, like a baby’s chest as he breathes. Hermit Songs also features some dissonance and chromaticism, which Barber incorporated into his style later in life. However, he uses these techniques only to support the harmony, and he never allows them to compromise the song cycle’s lyrical expression.
Singers performing this cycle should approach it head-on. That is, when they commit to singing *Hermit Songs*, they should also commit to researching the poems and analyzing Barber’s settings. Through this additional work, singers will understand that they should not be intimidated by the ambiguous tonality or missing time signatures. *Hermit Songs* is not meant to be sung “perfectly,” so to speak, with every eighth note in its proper place and every pitch clear and sharp as glass. Rather, expression reigns. Singers should learn all that they can about the cycle in order to embody the songs’ narrators—their despair, elation, curiosity, admiration, etc. The emotionality of the many voices featured should be first and foremost. Only then will the cycle be done justice.

Barber often found himself torn between the want for companionship and the desire for solitude. The life of a hermit appealed to the more introverted part of his soul, the part that found comfort and tranquility in silence and was inspired by it. It was only fitting, then, that Barber would eventually stumble upon the poems of the hermits of early Ireland, which reach into the depths of the authors’ minds and offer a glimpse at their thoughts. *Hermit Songs* is not written in the margins of a manuscript, but it could be considered to be, in a way, Barber’s own collection of hermit poetry. He did not write the poems, yet the texts combine with the musical settings to create new poems, and they are telling of Barber’s creative and deeply profound mind.
Bibliography


