

SAMUEL BARBER'S *KNOXVILLE: SUMMER OF 1915* FROM A MALE PERSPECTIVE

BY

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Abstract

This document examines Samuel Barber's 1947 work for orchestra and voice, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*. The piece was debuted by soprano Eleanor Steber, and it has become traditionally performed by sopranos. The purpose of this study is to present an argument that *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is a piece that can be performed meaningfully and effectively by the tenor voice as well.

This document touches on the history of *Knoxville*, and on the lives and creative outputs of composer Samuel Barber and American author James Agee. Also discussed is the relationship between these two men, and how their commonalities helped to shape this work.

The main argument is supported primarily through Agee's text and the way that Barber approached its setting, as well as aspects of vocal technique. American tenor John Aler was interviewed as one of the few tenors to have performed *Knoxville*, and he provided insights into the textual, musical, and performance aspects of the piece.

Given the gender neutrality of the piece, the autobiographical nature of the source material, and the relative ease of the vocal passages, it is concluded that *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is certainly appropriate for a tenor to perform.

Introduction

Knoxville: Summer of 1915, Op. 24 is a work composed for voice and orchestra by Samuel Barber, with text from a 1938 short prose piece by American author, poet, screenwriter, and film critic James Agee. *Knoxville* is a richly textured work that paints a sharp portrait of the summer evenings of Agee's childhood in Knoxville, Tennessee. The story is told from the perspective of a young child, who at times displays the insight of an adult. Traditionally, the vocal line is performed by soprano. The purpose of this study is to explore and discuss the reason that this piece is both suitable and effective when performed by a male voice. In order to demonstrate, this project will examine elements of Agee's text, both for dramatic content and the text setting that Barber employs. Other aspects to be explored will include vocal challenges that a male singer must deal with, which include elements such as tessitura and certain colors or techniques demanded of the singer.

This study will review the lives and creative outputs of both the composer and poet, and will examine *Knoxville* from a textual, vocal, and performance perspective. The hope is to increase the understanding of this great work and to illustrate that *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* is a piece that is not specific to gender, and can be performed meaningfully and effectively by the tenor voice.

General History of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

The premiere of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* took place on April 9, 1948. It was conducted by Serge Koussevitzky, a Russian conductor who served as music director for the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1924 until 1949. The Boston Orchestra performed with soprano Eleanor Steber, who had commissioned the work at the suggestion of her manager.

It is important to note that while it was Steber who commissioned *Knoxville*, it was not necessarily composed *for* her. Barber had begun his work on *Knoxville* with no particular singer in mind before Steber approached him. Barber's original vision for the work was to be more intimately orchestrated than the final product, but the composer knew that Koussevitzky preferred a full orchestra, and deduced that what Steber was hoping for was "a big whooping thing to do with Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony," which somewhat altered his approach, resulting in a fuller, more extensive setting.¹

The process of the piece's creation was significant, because it marked the first time that an American singer commissioned an orchestral work with voice. It was an attempt to bolster publicity for Steber, which worked well in her favor. Her debut performance of *Knoxville* was highly praised by many, and certainly helped to raise the status of her international career. However, the piece as a whole received some mixed reviews.

Most critics thought that Barber's music did a commendable job in evoking the strong feelings of nostalgia that are often associated with one's youth, but the predominant issue for many critics was the text itself. Many considered it to be unsuited to music setting. James Agee's text is written in a descriptive prose style that provides a great deal of imagery, but lacks some of the inherent rhythmic structures that one would find in poetry. The setting was criticized for being unnatural and somewhat lacking in character. John Riley of the *Boston Globe* said: "(The words) do not lend themselves to dramatic interpretation and...do not suggest the tension of an emotional climax."²

¹ Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 287.

² John W. Riley, *Boston Globe*, 10 April 1948.

Despite some initially mixed reviews, *Knoxville* became quite popular in the years after its premiere, and has since been performed by several renowned sopranos. Perhaps the most famous is the 1969 recording by Leontyne Price, whose luscious voice and attention to text has made her interpretation of *Knoxville* one of the most influential. She took no issue with how the text was set. In a 1981 interview, Price states that the piece expresses “Everything I know about my roots and about my Mum and Daddy and my hometown...it’s like a painting, and I think he set it perfectly. You can hear the streetcar, the horns, and everything; you can smell the strawberries.”³

Barber also worked on a smaller chamber version of the work that debuted in 1950 at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington D.C. It was performed by a small orchestra of about twenty players, soprano Eileen Farrell and conducted by William Strickland. This was Barber’s preferred version. He was quoted saying: “I really think it sounded much better in this intimate version.”⁴

In later years, famous sopranos Dawn Upshaw and Kathleen Battle would both make their own recordings of the work, in 1989 and 1995, respectively. *Knoxville* has remained quite popular throughout the years, and is considered by many to be Barber’s most “American” work, supported by the composer’s frequent use of word-painting, brief blues references, rich orchestral color, and varied meter.⁵

³ Peter Dickinson, ed., *Samuel Barber Remembered: A Century Tribute* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2010), 130.

⁴ Heyman, 291.

⁵ Barbara B. Heyman, "Barber, Samuel." (Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press).

Background of Samuel Barber

Samuel Barber was born in March of 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania into a reasonably affluent family. His father was a physician, and hoped that Samuel would follow in his footsteps; but his mother, aunt, and uncle all had musical backgrounds. His mother was a pianist, his uncle, Sidney Homer, was a composer of American art songs, and his aunt, Louise Homer, was an operatic contralto, who sang with the Metropolitan Opera regularly for many years in the early 1900s. Thus, Barber had no lack of musical influences in his young life, and began showing a great love and talent for music at a very young age. He composed his first piece at the age of seven, and at the age of nine, famously wrote to his mother:

Dear Mother: I have written this to tell you my worrying secret. Now don't cry when you read it because it is neither yours nor my fault. I suppose I will have to tell it now without any nonsense. To begin with I was not meant to be an athlete [*sic*]. I was meant to be a composer, and will be I'm sure. I'll ask you one more thing.—Don't ask me to try to forget this unpleasant thing and go play football.—Please—Sometimes I've been worrying about this so much that it makes me mad (not very).⁶

His first opera, *The Rose Tree*, was written when he was ten years of age, and featured a libretto by Annie Noble, who was the family's cook. At twelve years old, he took an organist position at a church, and at fourteen entered the Curtis Institute of Music where he studied voice, piano, and composition. During his time at Curtis, he made some important connections. One of Barber's classmates was Gian Carlo Menotti, who would become a very important figure in Barber's life, both personally and professionally. Another was to the Schirmer family, who would go on to publish Barber's works throughout his lifetime.

In his twenties, Barber completed many compositions, some of which were highly successful. He received several awards during this time, which included the American Prix de

⁶ Nathan Broder, *Samuel Barber* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1954), 9.

Rome, a Pulitzer traveling scholarship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.⁷ In 1938 he also had the great honor of having two of his pieces, *Adagio for Strings* and *Essay for Orchestra*, performed by the NBC Symphony Orchestra and conducted by the internationally renowned Arturo Toscanini. After the first rehearsal, Toscanini was quoted as saying “Semplice e bella” (simple and beautiful).

During World War II, Barber served in the Army. Because his vision was flawed, he was placed on special assignment, performing mostly clerical work in an office in New York. Several months later, he was transferred to the Army Air Corps where he was encouraged to compose. The first piece he wrote in the armed forces was *Commando March*, which led the Army Air Corps to commission Barber to compose a symphony. He was then flown from airfield to airfield, in a variety of different aircraft, in order to soak up the atmosphere. The resulting work was his second symphony.

When Barber first played a completed portion of the symphony for one of his officers, the officer expressed disappointment at how traditional the music was. He claimed that because the Army Air Corps used all of the latest technical advancements in military flying, that a symphony written for them should sound more modern. As it turns out, this particular officer often listened to foreign broadcasts on shortwave radio, and was especially fond of the music of Alois Hába; a Czech composer who specialized in quarter-tone music. Despite the criticism, Barber finished his *Symphony Dedicated to the Army Air Forces*. It was performed March 3, 1944 by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Koussevitzky.⁸

⁷ Heyman, "Barber, Samuel."

⁸ Broder, 36-37.

In 1943, Barber and Menotti purchased their home “Capricorn,” in Mount Kisco, New York. It was here that Barber saw some of his most productive years of composing, and the home also became a meeting place for many artists and intellectuals. Some of his most significant works—*Medea* (1946), *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (1948), and Piano Sonata (1949)—were composed during his first few years at the Capricorn home.

Throughout his career, Barber received numerous honors and awards. He represented the United States at the International Music Council in 1952, and was the first American composer to attend the Congress of Soviet Composers in 1962. He won the Henry Hadley Medal (1958), a nomination to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1958), and the Gold Medal for Music at the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1976), among others. He also won two Pulitzer Prizes in Music: the first for his opera *Vanessa* (1956), and the second for his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1962).⁹

Despite his many successes, Barber was not without disappointments. He composed his second opera, *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966) for the opening of the new Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center in New York City. Unfortunately, it was poorly received by both the press and the public. Much of the criticism fell upon elements of the excessive production rather than the music itself, but Barber would continue to revise the work for the next decade. During this period, he struggled with depression and alcoholism, but still managed to compose a great deal of vocal music.

In the late 1970s, Barber was hospitalized several times for the treatment of cancer, but continued to compose until he was nearly 70. His final years of output were more contemplative than his earlier works, but not morbid or depressing like many other composers close to death.

⁹ Heyman, "Barber, Samuel."

His final major work was *Third Essay for Orchestra* (1978). He died of cancer in 1981 at the age of 70. At the time of his death, nearly all of his compositions had been recorded; and many of them had been commissioned or first performed by famous artists: Eleanor Steber, Leontyne Price, Vladimir Horowitz, Pierre Bernac, Francis Poulenc, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

Background of James Agee

James Agee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, on November 27, 1909. When Agee was six years old, his father was killed in a car accident. This had a great deal of impact on young Agee, and would highly influence the rest of his life and literary output. One of his most successful works, *A Death in the Family*, was based around this event, and the text of *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* was later used as a preface for the novel.¹⁰ Along with his sister, he received most of his early education from boarding schools. During his years in high school, he became the editor of a monthly paper where he was able to begin publishing his earliest articles, plays, poetry, and short stories. He did not do particularly well in school, but on the caliber of his work, managed to become admitted into Harvard University. He made many connections at Harvard, and after he finished his degree, moved to New York City.

In New York, Agee wrote for both *Fortune* and *Time* magazines, as well as his own material. He published his only volume of poetry, *Permit Me Voyage*, in 1934. In 1942, he became the film critic for *Time* magazine, and continued to review books as well. He later left this position and began working as a freelance writer, focusing on magazine articles and movie scripts. During this period, he wrote a very well-received article about silent film actors: Charlie

¹⁰ Jean Louise Kreiling, "The Songs of Samuel Barber: A Study in Literary Taste and Text Setting." Ph.D. diss., (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1986), 173.

Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon.¹¹ As a writer of screenplays, his career was brief, but he worked on two highly-expected films: *The African Queen* and *The Night of the Hunter* (1951 and 1955, respectively).

Agee was married three times, and had two daughters and a son with his third wife, Mia Fritsch (m. 1946). Unfortunately, he was an alcoholic and heavy smoker, and his body could not handle such abuse. For several years he suffered from angina, until in 1955 he had a major heart attack that he did not survive. He was 45 years old.¹²

Agee was not very famous during his lifetime, but since his death, his status has grown considerably. His 1941 book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, went nearly unnoticed immediately after its publishing, but was recognized as one of the great literary works of the twentieth century by the New York School of Journalism, and served as the inspiration for Aaron Copland's opera *The Tender Land*. In 1958, he also won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for his novel *A Death in the Family*, which had been posthumously published the previous year.¹³

Barber and Agee

When Barber first read Agee's lyric prose work *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, he was stunned and moved by the work. He was fond of the lyrical prose style, despite those who would later suggest that the text was not well suited for musical setting. The frequent use of alliteration and word repetition must have struck a chord with him. Most striking to Barber, however, was the way it painted the images of childhood, and the nostalgia it evoked. In an interview, he said:

¹¹ Laurence Bergreen, *James Agee: A Life* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984), 329.

¹² *Ibid*, 405.

¹³ *Ibid*, 408.

I had always admired Mr. Agee's writing and this prose poem particularly struck me because the summer evening he describes in his native southern town reminded me so much of similar evenings when I was a child at home... You see, it expresses a child's feeling of loneliness, wonder, and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep.¹⁴

Part of the reason this text was so affecting for Barber must certainly be attributed to the commonalities that he and Agee shared. Barber and Agee were contemporaries, born in 1910 and 1909, respectively. During the summer of 1915, both were five years old. Both grew up near large American cities (Barber near Philadelphia, and Agee near Knoxville), and the neighborhoods of their youth were similar in size, demographic, and economic standing. Each of these men had back yards where their families would meet, and would lie in the grass on long summer evenings. They both had an aunt who was a musician. The family similarities were exciting for Barber, and in a letter to his uncle, he wrote: "It reminded me so much of summer evenings in West Chester, now very far away, and all of you are in it!"¹⁵

Both men studied at private American institutions of higher education (Agee at Harvard, Barber at the Curtis Institute of Music). The two became good friends; Agee was one of the intellectuals who would frequent Barber and Menotti's Capricorn estate, where Agee would read his works aloud. Both men were deeply drawn to the other's medium. Barber had a strong affinity for text: "I have always had a sense of the written word, and have sometimes thought that I'd rather write words than music."¹⁶ Similarly, Agee also had a strong passion for music: "Often,

¹⁴ Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music*, 279.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 278-279.

¹⁶ Kreiling, 1.

I feel I'd give anything to have forgotten everything but music, because I want so to compose. I really think I could have done it—possibly better than writing.”¹⁷

Perhaps the most significant commonality is the shared loss of their fathers that surround the genesis of both the text and the music. Agee’s text focuses on the time in his childhood just before he loses his father. Similarly, during the time that Barber was composing the music of *Knoxville*, he was coping with the impending loss of his own father. Barber would later dedicate the work with the inscription: “In memory of my father.”¹⁸

The creative process was noticeably similar for both men, as well. After Barber read the text for *Knoxville*, his musical inspiration came quickly:

Agee’s Poem was vivid and moved me deeply, and my musical response that summer of 1947 was immediate and intense. I think I must have composed *Knoxville* within a few days.¹⁹

When the inspiration came to Agee, he too worked quickly.

I was sketching around, vaguely, on a possible autobiographical novel, and was so much involved and interested in early childhood memories... This brought nostalgia for much that I remembered very accurately; all I had to do was write it; so the writing was easier than most I have managed. It took possibly an hour and a half... There is little if anything consciously invented in it, it is strictly autobiographical.²⁰

These coincidences, both in the lives of these two men and their similar approaches to this work, probably helped to propel *Knoxville* to the high level it attained. For Agee, it marked

¹⁷ Ibid, 162.

¹⁸ Samuel Barber, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 1949), 3.

¹⁹ Barbara B. Heyman, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music*, 279.

²⁰ Ibid, 280.

one of the more important works he would write. Barber's contribution is a brilliant example of his ability to set texts and bring them to life with his music.

Aspects of Style and Text Setting

Throughout the course of his career, Barber wrote 39 pieces for accompanied solo voice, many of these at a time when the more experimental works of Schoenberg, Babbitt, Ives, and Cage were receiving a great deal of attention in the music world. Despite the avant-garde trend in many of his contemporaries, Barber's style would remain a bit more conservative. He received some criticism for this, but the composer felt very strongly on this issue, saying: "There's no reason music should be difficult for an audience to understand, is there?"²¹

The accessibility and lyric nature of Barber's vocal music could be attributed, in part, to his background as a singer. Perhaps as a result, his vocal lines tend to be tuneful and graceful, and are well supported by harmonies that are usually diatonic. When strong dissonances occur, they are often used to color a specific element of the text, and the tonal center is rarely unclear. The range and intervals of his pieces are generally manageable by a proficient singer.

One of the more interesting aspects of Barber's writing is the irregular use of rhythm and meter, which can often be complex. However, his focus is always on the text, and these patterns are usually composed in a way that imitates the natural rhythm of speech, making it more approachable from a vocal perspective. It is this insistent attention to text that makes his setting of *Knoxville* so striking. When asked if he let the text shape his music, Barber responded: |

You pretty much have to if you don't want to distort the text... I try, by the way, not to distort the natural rhythms of a poem, because if this happens the words will be distorted and so will the public's understanding of them. I very much want the words to be

²¹ Kreiling, 3.

comprehensible.²²

Simply making the text “comprehensible” downplays the task of the composer, who has many considerations when deciding upon the treatment of a text. Should the music follow the form of the text, or not? They must decide what level of meaning to give the poetry. They can decide to emphasize the sound of the language itself, focusing on vowel and consonant sounds, pitch, and cadence; or they can focus more heavily on trying to recreate the text’s underlying meaning. Let us examine how Barber approached the text of *Knoxville*.

One of the most notable aspects of Barber’s setting was that he omitted well over half of Agee’s text. Perhaps this decision was made in order to make the text more mysterious, and take away some of the contextual elements in order to allow the listener more freedom in an individual interpretation.

It is also likely that some of this text was removed because of its less poetic qualities. Phrases like: “in the late nineties and early nineteen hundreds” are purely factual and carry little dramatic meaning. However, there are also several instances where Barber cuts text that is highly poetic. Agee wrote vivid descriptions of the sounds of the locusts, of the trees, and of water spraying from a garden hose, all of which Barber would ultimately remove from his setting. Another omitted section of Agee’s text occurs between the phrases “a frailing of fire who breathes” and “parents on porches.” Here is a portion of the cut text:

Content, silver, like peeps of light, each cricket makes his comment over and over in the drowned grass. A cold toad thumpily flounders. Within the edges of damp shadows of side yards are hovering children nearly sick with joy of fear, who watch the unguarding of a telephone pole. Around white carbon corner lamps bugs of all sizes are lifted elliptic,

²² Ibid, 13-14.

solar systems. Big hardshells bruise themselves, assailant: he is fallen on his back, legs squiggling.²³

This text is much more poetic than some of the other omissions, providing clear images and descriptions. While the reason for its exclusion is unknown, it may be because Barber found this section to be overly focused and specific when compared to the rest of *Knoxville*, or perhaps he felt that it was too tangential.

A final cut worth discussing is the text that Barber removes between “and I too am lying there” and “They are not talking much”:

First we were sitting— then one of us lay down and then we all lay down on our stomachs or on our sides or on our backs and they have kept on talking.²⁴

This omission could be related to the drawn out and somewhat repetitive nature of the text. The text itself does not add anything especially important, but instead meanders around, perhaps a bit too casually.

Noteworthy as well is that Barber made this cut late in the composition process. It appears in an early manuscript, and Barber sets it to the same melody, slightly altered, as the lines of text that precede it: “On the rough wet grass...and I too am lying there.”²⁵ He also uses the melody on a line that appears immediately after: “They are not talking much.” It is likely that this section was cut for musical reasons, rather than textual ones. This section may have seemed too repetitive.

²³ William Phillips and Philip Rahv, eds. “*The Partisan Reader: Ten Years of Partisan Review, 1934-1944: An Anthology.*” (New York: The Dial Press, 1946), 30-31.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁵ Kreiling, 181.

The remaining text, Barber divided into sections, and Jean Kreiling has analyzed *Knoxville's* form as being rondo-like, as may be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Form of Knoxville: Summer of 1915.

<u>Section</u>	<u>Measure</u>	<u>Text</u>
Prelude (P)	1-5	N/A
A	6-40	"It has become that time of evening. . ."
B	41-91	"A streetcar raising its iron moan . . ."
C	92-114	"Now is the night one blue dew . . ."
A'	114-127	"Parents on porches: rock and rock. . ."
D	128-201	"On the rough wet grass of the back yard. . ."
P'	202-230	"May God bless my people. . ."
A"	231-263	"After a little I am taken in and put to bed . . ." ²⁶

The 12/8 time signature of the opening section provides a lilting triple meter, that is certainly inspired by the word "rocking." The triple meter also helps to keep the text sound more speech like, and to establish a sense of folk-like simplicity.

²⁶ Ibid, 182.

Example 1

12
8

* * * * *

switch-ing their weight of aes - ti - val bo - dy

Detailed description: This musical notation is in 12/8 time. It consists of two measures. The first measure contains six eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4. The second measure contains three eighth notes: G4, A4, B4. Asterisks are placed above the first, third, fifth, and seventh notes (G4, C5, A4, B4) to indicate rhythmic accents. The lyrics 'switch-ing their weight of aes - ti - val bo - dy' are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables across notes.

Barber, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, m. 22-23

As seen in Example 1, the main rhythmic accents (marked by *) fall on the main word stresses, which helps to illustrate the slow, footsteps of those passing by. To keep the 12/8 pattern from becoming too simple or repetitive, Barber consistently relies on these rhythmic accents and also makes use of rests in order to shape phrases, or color the text. The text immediately following Example 1 is “talking casually.” In contrast to the reinforced accents of this previous phrase, both “talking” and “casually” are placed on weak beats. This serves the purpose of adding variety to the 12/8 texture, and also paints the word “casually” quite nicely. Example 2 illustrates how the word stresses shift away from the rhythmic accents established in the previous phrase.

Example 2

* * * * *

talk - ing cas - ual - ly

Detailed description: This musical notation is in 12/8 time. It consists of two measures. The first measure contains a quarter rest, followed by two eighth notes (G4, A4), and a quarter note (B4). The second measure contains a quarter rest, followed by a half note (G4), and two eighth notes (A4, B4). Asterisks are placed above the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth notes (G4, B4, G4, A4, B4) to indicate rhythmic accents. The lyrics 'talk - ing cas - ual - ly' are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables across notes.

Barber, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, mm. 23-24

In this section, there are falling intervals on the words “talking” and “casually,” an example of Barber using the naturally falling pitch of the spoken text. Interesting to note as well is how the word “hov’ring” is set: the note is a G natural 5, and is marked *piano*, which necessitates a more open, lighter sound than the rest of the line. If done well, it paints the word nicely.

The “B” section is different from the remainder of the work. This section is dynamically louder than any of the other sections, and incorporates much more dissonance. The vocal lines are sharper, more accented, and highly chromatic at times.

Barber plays with the alliteration of Agee’s text in this section as well. Words like “streetcar,” “stopping,” “starting,” and “stertorous” are grouped closely together, and phrases “the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it” are set sharply with *staccato* articulations, to emphasize the consonants, and produce clear images. The chromatic melisma on the word “moan” does this as well.

As the streetcar finally passes and begins to fade into the distance, we see the word “faints” in m. 78. It appears several times in the next few phrases, but always a different form of the word. In m. 80, it appears as “faint,” m. 83 as “fainter,” m. 84 as “fainting,” and finally a restatement of the first “faints” in m. 87. Barber uses the repetition of words as motivation for the texture to become thinner and the dynamic level to slowly drop. The streetcar fades away, and slowly the piece melts into evening, and section C.

“Now is the night one blue dew” appears two times at the beginning of this section. The first is set to half and whole notes, lengthening the phrase and helping it to feel slower and calmer than the preceding section. The second statement is in m. 105 and starts similarly, but

with faster note values that help pull us back from the ethereal setting of the first. The piece then transitions back to the lawn, and Barber reestablishes the 12/8 meter that defines the A section.

This next section, defined by Kreiling as A', is a brief revisiting of some of the thematic material from the A section, and only lasts a few measures. Barber again plays with the text here, and sets "The dry and exalted noise of the locusts" in a lower vocal register, and the entire phrase sits on an F-sharp. This allows the singer to stress the "z," "s," and "ts" sounds, adding a drier, raspy quality that can be associated with the noise of the locusts.

Section D begins with "On the rough wet grass," and although it is new material, it returns to the simplistic, conversational quality of the A section. It remains in this style until the text starts mentioning the members of Agee's family, specifically his father. Barber chooses to set "One is my father who is good to me" with a long stress on the word "good." As mentioned earlier, Barber was in the process of losing his father as he was composing *Knoxville*, and perhaps this accent and lengthening of the word "good" is related to his personal experiences. It is almost as if Barber is clinging to the word "good" as long as he can, before being thrust into the much harsher, more dramatic music that appears in the following measures.

This more intense music (beginning in m. 183) is characterized by sudden rising minor ninths in both orchestra and vocal line, which are jarring after the tranquility of the previous measures. The text in this moment is imbued with a sense of urgency, and implies that the storyteller knows that this happy moment of his childhood will not last, and there is a sense of pity for this child, because of the pain he will endure.

By some chance, here they are, all on this earth;
And who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth
Lying on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening...

The word “sorrow” is set as a B-flat 5, and is the highest note in the piece, helping to reinforce the sentiment of the text. After the B-flat, the tessitura remains high, and slowly descends in stepwise motion on the text “Lying in quilts, on the grass” until it finally settles into the “prayer” section, which derives its thematic elements from the prelude.

Unlike much of the rest of *Knoxville*, the 4/4 meter and rhythmic design of the P' section (a repeat of the prelude section, as defined by Kreiling) is straightforward. The simplicity of the text and the thinner, more open harmonic structure of the music suggest a somber, prayer-like atmosphere. It maintains this quality until the line “and in the hour of their taking away,” which becomes more chromatic again, and builds until the final syllable of “away.” At this point, there is a modulation back to the original key of F-sharp minor, and a restatement of augmented thematic elements.

In the final section, we have another return of A. The lilting 12/8 meter returns, and is associated this time with sleep. Barber sets the text “Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her” in a way that suggests a yawn. In m. 236, the word “smiling” is set on a G5 and F-sharp 5, which are approached from below. Because of where this lies in the voice, the singer is required to stretch up to the pitch. This, in combination with the slower duple rhythm, gives the word a yawning effect. The same thing happens in m. 237 in the word “draws,” where a pure “ah” vowel is sustained on an E5 before leaping up to an A5, also with duple rhythm.

The final phrases of *Knoxville*, like the “prayer” section, are set simply. Barber keeps his rhythms straightforward, and textual stresses are in line with these. He uses these devices to highlight the more serious nature of this text, which references the child’s family: “but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.” Barber further emphasizes

the profundity of this text by starting the last phrase *pianissimo* on a high A5. This creates a light, almost whispering effect in the high vocal registers, which is hauntingly beautiful.

Interestingly, despite the fact that *Knoxville* is most often performed by a soprano, there are no instances in the text that imply anything about gender, either masculine or feminine. Indeed the text was written by a man, but its content focuses on the happy memories of childhood, when the concepts of grief and loss are not yet discovered. It stands to reason that these emotions are universal for all people, and could be expressed by female or male.

Interview with John Aler

During the course of research, I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing John Aler, one of the few tenors who have performed *Knoxville*. Professor Aler has had a prestigious vocal career, singing roles at the English National Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin, New York City Opera, Washington National Opera, and the Bayerische Staatsoper, among others.

Aler has performed *Knoxville* multiple times, both with orchestra and with piano reduction. When he was a student, Aler fell in love with the recordings made by Eleanor Steber and Leontyne Price, which served as part of his inspiration to attempt performing the work. But ultimately, it was the text that drove Aler to pursue *Knoxville*.

I love the whole movement of Southern American literature that describes home and family. It's sentimental, but not gooey or maudlin. It's just kind of an honest, straightforward utterance of what life was like then. So I always thought it was brilliant. I was always kind of surprised to find that it isn't poetry, it's prose. He [Agee] just wrote so incredibly beautifully, that it scans like poetry almost. And Barber set it so sensitively that it sounds like poetry. It's so perfect. The language is so charming and unpretentious.

Aler acknowledged the fact that it is rare for tenors to perform *Knoxville*, but points primarily to the text for justification. "The Agee text is so autobiographical...it's not at all a feminine text, it's completely gender neutral." What Aler is referring to here, is the idea that this

text takes place during childhood, at a time before sexuality develops. He also accurately notes that the score is not marked specifically for soprano, but designated as “high voice.”

So I thought, “gee, I could sing this, it’s not out of the question,” there are a couple tricky spots, but I was more concerned with the lightness of my voice rather than the fact that I’m a man.

When telling people that he was hoping to sing *Knoxville*, many of them were initially taken aback, but after some reflection, most of them agreed that the piece is perfectly appropriate for the male voice. “That was a little bit how I was at first, really. I thought, ‘Oh I love this piece so much, I’d really like to sing it, but it’s for soprano,’ and then I realized that it wasn’t.”

Knoxville is not without its vocal challenges, but Aler does not believe that there is anything that puts it out of reach for a good male singer.

You know that section “now is the night, one blue dew”? I thought maybe that was the spot that would give me problems, or make it difficult for a man to sing. But then after I tried it out, I found that it was quite nice for a light tenor voice to be able to go up there and float that B-flat.

Aler further explained his approach to the soft B-flat on the word “blue,” saying that for him, the note was not terribly challenging because he chose to flip into falsetto, which is completely appropriate in this context. In my own performance of the piece, I found that this technique worked well. Vocally, the falsetto was easy to maintain, and the color seemed appropriate in the context.

A similar challenge also appears in the closing phrases of the piece: “but will not, oh will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.” The text itself is somewhat odd, and a bit unsettling.

It’s a little off-putting, I think, at the end. Because the piece has such a holistic sense. That everything is right, that everything was perfect and I was happy, and I was fine, and it was good. Then suddenly it’s kind of jolting to come to the end and have this sense of hanging, and not being complete. I kind of wrestled with that for a long time. I sang the piece and I loved it, but it occurred to me years later, when thinking about that line, and

James Agee himself: what is it that defines us? What is it that makes us? It's not our past is it? It's not our parents, or our families, really. We have to take responsibilities for our own selves, for our own development, and what we become. So I always thought that there's a little bit of mourning involved in that. I think that he (Agee) did a whole lot of searching in the past for what it was that made him who he was. And I don't know, did he find it? I kind of think he did. But he had to express that.

The final phrase (mm. 250-253) is also set very high, beginning on a high A5, and the dynamic marking is *pianissimo*. Vocally, this phrase can be one of the trickiest in the entire piece. It needs to stay light, but the text demands that it maintains some vocal presence. Going completely into falsetto would not provide the necessary weight of the text. Aler approached the phrase with this in mind:

I tried to do a *voix mixte* for the last line... I tried to give it a little more heft (than falsetto), but certainly not heavy, still light. I wanted to make it fuller because I think it's important that there is a sense of feeling sorry for yourself in that line. I wanted to get that across. It's got to be a little bit of a cry, I believe. There's nothing comfortable about it. It's very uncomfortable. And I think it makes the audience uncomfortable too, when they hear it. It always did me... There's kind of an angst-ridden cry about it.

Indeed, one of the challenges of performing *Knoxville* as a tenor, is navigating these two soft, high passages. The approach that Aler suggests makes sense from both a musical and vocal standpoint. For a man, it is possible to flip into falsetto and float the word "blue" in the higher register. The challenge here, is to make sure that the transition from full-voice to falsetto remains smooth and consistent.

The final phrase, "but will not ever tell me who I am," presents more of a challenge than the passage previously discussed. The highly personal nature of the text, and high tessitura both necessitate *voix mixte*, a mixture of full-voice and falsetto, and achieving this is not easy. It requires a high level of laryngeal freedom and breath support. However, Aler's comment is accurate; this should certainly be manageable for a capable tenor.

Aler's only other concern about singing *Knoxville* was the challenge of cutting through the orchestra at the beginning of the B section.

The only time that I had a problem was with the orchestra during "A Streetcar raising its iron moan," which sits a little bit low, and it's a little more heavily orchestrated. It's a little more difficult to cut through at that point. But...it seemed to work pretty well.

This issue would certainly need to be addressed by any singer with a lighter voice, regardless of sex, but will vary greatly depending on performing forces and venue. For singers possessing larger instruments, this passage would be of little concern.

This was not the only time that Aler has sung repertoire that is unusual for a man. He has also performed Schubert's *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* (*Shepherd on the Rock*) with clarinet and piano, another piece typically performed by soprano. This demonstrates that as a performer, one always have to be on the lookout for opportunities. Sometimes it might be something a bit quirky, or out of the ordinary that is going to provide a chance to perform. In the end, it benefits musicians to be open and to explore, regardless of perceived limitations.

Conclusions

After spending a significant amount of time with *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, it is interesting to reexamine our preconceived notions about this piece. Out of tradition, which began with Eleanor Steber's first performance of the piece in 1948, *Knoxville* has been sung almost exclusively by sopranos. Unlike other well-known gender-specific pieces, such as *Dichterliebe* or *Frauenliebe und Leben*, the text of *Knoxville* does not imply one sex over the other. It is focused on the childhood memories of Agee, a man, and provides beautiful images and emotions that are accessible to anyone.

In regard to performance, *Knoxville* is absolutely appropriate for the tenor voice. The majority of the piece is easily sung, and those sections that present a challenge for the singer are certainly as manageable for men as they are for women. The experience of John Aler helps to reinforce this concept, and demonstrate that tenors performing at a high level have had success performing *Knoxville* in the past.

A counter-argument that could be presented is the idea that by using a soprano voice, Barber was hoping to capture the light, childlike qualities that a female voice might have as compared to a male voice. However, Barber never specifies a voice type in any of his scores. It is always designated as being written for “voice and orchestra.” If he had felt strongly about it, it is likely that he would have made a more specific designation. The fact that he had nearly finished composition on *Knoxville* when Steber commissioned the work further suggests that Barber’s original intention was not necessarily to have the piece performed by a woman. It is also possible that Barber gave the matter little thought. There are a great many vocal works that are performed by both men and women; perhaps Barber simply assumed that *Knoxville* would follow in this tradition, driven by performer curiosity.

It is significant that while most people do not expect *Knoxville* to be performed by a man, few people are strongly *opposed* to the idea, especially after some consideration of the text. This can only be a good thing, as it opens the door for others to perform this great work. The goal of this study is not necessarily to argue that a man should be allowed to sing *Knoxville*, but to challenge performers and artists to question tradition, so that, in the words of John Aler, “we may find the opportunity to experiment and explore repertoire that we might not have the chance to experience otherwise.”

Appendix

Full Text of James Agee's *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*

Only text appearing in brackets was used in Samuel Barber's setting.

[We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child.]

*This first line is not set to music, but it appears in the score as an introduction to the piece.

It was a little bit sort of block, fairly solidly lower middle class, with one or two juts apiece on either side of that. The houses corresponded: middle-sized gracefully fretted wood houses built in the late nineties and early nineteen hundreds, with small front and side and more spacious back yards, and trees in the yards, and porches. These were soft-wooded trees, poplars, tulip trees, cottonwoods. There were fences around one or two of the houses, but mainly the yards ran into each other with only now and then a low hedge that wasn't doing very well. There were few good friends among the grown people, and they were not enough for the other sort of intimate acquaintance, but everyone nodded and spoke, and even might talk short times, trivially, and at the two extremes of general or the particular, and ordinarily next door neighbors talked quiet when they happened to run into each other, and never paid calls. The men mostly small businessmen, one or two very modestly executives, one or two worked with their hands, most of them clerical, and most of them between and forty--five.

But it is of these evenings, I speak. Supper was at six and was over by half past. There was still daylight, shining softly and with a tarnish, like the lining of a shell; and the carbon lamps lifted the corners were on in the light, and the locusts were started, and the fire flies were out, and a few frogs were flopping in the dewy grass, by the time the fathers and the children came out. The children ran out first hell bent and yelling those names by which they were known; then the fathers sank out leisurely crossed suspenders, their collars removed and their necks looking tall and shy. The mothers stayed back in the kitchen washing and drying, putting things away, recrossing their traceless footsteps like the lifetime journeys of bees, measuring out the dry cocoa for breakfast. When they came out they had taken off their aprons and their skirts were dampened and they sat in rockers on porches quietly. It is not of the games children play in the evening that I want to speak now, it is of a contemporaneous atmosphere that has little to do with them: that of fathers of families, each in his space of lawn, his shirt fishlike pale in the unnatural light and his face nearly anonymous, hosing their lawns. The hoses were attached at spigots that stood out of the brick foundations of the houses. The nozzles were variously set but usually so there was a long sweet stream spray, the nozzle wet in the hand, the water trickling the right forearm and peeled--back cuff, and the water whishing out a long loose and low-curved and so gentle a sound. First an insane noise of violence in the nozzle, then the irregular sound of adjustment, then the smoothing into steadiness and a pitch accurately tuned to the size and style of stream as any violin. So many qualities of sound out of one hose: so many choral differences out of those several hoses that were in earshot. Out of any one hose, the almost dead silence of the release, and the short still arch of the separate big drops, silent as a held breath, and only the noise of the fluttering noise on leaves and the slapped grass at the fall of a big drop. That, and the

intense hiss with the intense stream; that, and that intensity not growing less but growing more quiet and delicate with the turn the nozzle, up to the extreme tender whisper when the water was just a wide of film. Chiefly, though, the hoses were set much alike, in a compromise between distance and tenderness of spray (and quite surely a sense of art behind this compromise, and a quiet deep joy, too real to recognize itself), and the sounds therefore were pitched much alike; pointed by the snorting start of a new hose; decorated by some man playful with the nozzle; left empty, like God by the sparrow's fall, when any single one of them desists: and all, though near alike, of various pitch; and in this unison.

These sweet pale streamings in the light out their pallors and their voices all together, mothers hushing their children, the hushing unnaturally prolonged, the men gentle and silent and each snail-like withdrawn into the quietude of what he singly is doing, the urination of huge children stood loosely military against an invisible wall, and gentle happy and peaceful, tasting the mean goodness of their living like the last of their suppers in their mouths; while the locusts carry on this noise of hoses on their much higher and sharper key. The noise of the locust is dry, and it seems not to be rasped or vibrated but urged from him as if through a small orifice by a breath that can never give out. Also there is never one locust but an illusion of at least a thousand. The noise of each locust is pitched in some classic locust range out of which none of them varies more than two full tones: and yet you seem to hear each locust discrete from all the rest, and there is a long, slow, pulse in their noise, like the scarcely defined arch of a long and high set bridge. They are all around in every tree, so that the noise seems to come from nowhere and everywhere at once, from the whole shell heaven, shivering in your flesh and teasing your eardrums, the boldest of all the sounds of night. And yet it is habitual to summer nights, and is of the great order of noises, like the noises of the sea and of the blood her precocious grandchild, which you realize you are hearing only when you catch yourself listening. Meantime from low in the dark, just outside the swaying horizons of the hoses, conveying always grass in the damp of dew and its strong green-black smear of smell, the regular yet spaced noises of the crickets, each a sweet cold silver noise three-noted, like the slipping each time of three matched links of a small chain. But the men by now, one by one, have silenced their hoses and drained and coiled them. Now only two, and now only one, is left, and you see only ghostlike shirt with the sleeve garters, and sober mystery of his mild face like the lifted face of large cattle enquiring of your presence in a pitch dark pool of meadow; and now he too is gone; and

This is where Barber's setting begins

[it has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds hung havens, hangars. People go by; things go by. A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber. A street car raising its iron moan; stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts, the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter, fainting, lifting, lifts, faints

forgone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew. Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose. Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes.]

Content, silver, like peeps of light, each cricket makes his comment over and over in the drowned grass. A cold toad thumpily flounders. Within the edges of damp shadows of side yards are hovering children nearly sick with joy of fear, who watch the unguarding of a telephone pole. Around white carbon corner lamps bugs of all sizes are lifted elliptic, solar systems. Big hardshells bruise themselves, assailant: he is fallen on his back, legs squiggling.

[Parents on porches: rock and rock: From damp strings morning glories: hang their ancient faces. The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums. On the rough wet grass of the back yard my father and mother have spread quilts. We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there.]

First we were sitting up, then one of us lay down, and then we all lay down, on our stomachs, or on our sides, or on our backs, and they have kept on talking.

[They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet, of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all. The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near. All my people are larger bodies than mine,]

quiet,

[with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night. May god bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father, oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away. After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.]

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