

FINAL PROJECT PROPOSAL (TMUS 8339) Major Composition

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

I would like to adapt the libretto and compose music for a one-act chamber opera based upon Alice Gerstenberg's comic play, *Overtones*.¹ The new opera would be retitled, *The Clever Artifice of Harriet and Margaret*, and feature a cast of four female singers with an estimated running time of 50-60 minutes. My plot summary follows:

In the first scene, Harriet Goodrich, an upper class woman living with her husband in New York City, is expecting a visit from an old acquaintance, Margaret Caldwell. As Harriet fixes last minute details, she has a conversation with her inner self, Hetty, played by a second actress. Hetty says that she will never forgive Harriet for not marrying painter, John Caldwell, who is now Margaret's husband. Harriet claims that John was "too poor a gamble," and instead married wealthy Charles Goodrich. Determined to win John back, Hetty schemes with Harriet about what to say when Margaret arrives.

As the second scene begins, Margaret enters, shadowed by her inner self, Maggie, played by a fourth actress. Harriet and Margaret exchange pleasantries and catch up. As Hetty and Maggie interject sideline commentary, Maggie reveals that life has been difficult for Margaret and John. They have recently returned from Paris with very little money, or prospects for work. Margaret hopes Harriet will agree to have her portrait painted by John, and subsequently get John into Harriet's affluent social circles.

Coached by Maggie, Margaret carefully tries to arrange the deal without Harriet suspecting that such a deal is exactly why Margaret came. Simultaneously, Hetty tells Harriet to boast about her wealth and connections in hopes of persuading Margaret to set up a painting session with John. Although each woman tries not to seem too eager, arrangements are eventually made for Harriet to come for a sitting at the Caldwell's studio. Delighted with the plan, Margaret and Maggie leave.

The story concludes with Harriet and Hetty alone again. Hetty excitedly wonders what will happen when she sees John again. Harriet worries what she will wear.

American playwright, Alice Gerstenberg (1885-1972) spent most of her career as an actress and playwright in Chicago. Written in 1913, *Overtones* is considered her most well known work, and the earliest example of a play that dramatizes the unconscious on stage.² Early performance history of *Overtones* includes its first production in 1915 by the Washington Square Players at the Bandbox Theatre in New York City, a vaudeville production at the Palace Theatre in Chicago in 1916 and a subsequent staging in London in 1917.

A contemporary audience may look upon Harriet's and Margaret's situations with different eyes than audiences of the 1920s. In its historical context, *Overtones* portrayed important feminist themes and Freudian concepts of the early twentieth century. Harriet and Margaret play traditional roles of women in American society at the time, in their dependence upon their husbands for social status and economic stability. The staging of their outer and inner selves (Harriet/Hetty and Margaret/Maggie) as a construct of the play, mirrors Freud's

¹ The play is available online through the Project Gutenberg site under a collection titled, *Washington Square Plays*. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3068/3068-h/3068-h.htm#2H_4_0006.

² Beth Kattelman and the Gale Group Incorporated. "Overtone Alice Gerstenberg 1915" in *Dramas for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Dramas, Volume 17* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thompson Learning, Inc., 2003), 181.

concept of the struggle of the Ego and the Id. What remains perpetually “contemporary” is their poignant desperation for a life they do not have, their regret over choices made, and their longing for love. Hetty and Maggie express all of these emotions that Harriet and Margaret cover over in a veneer of politeness and amiability.

Projecting this melodrama on the surface while simultaneously projecting the deeply personal emotions underneath, are the challenges and potentials of creating an opera out of this play. I anticipate that the juxtaposition of Harriet and Margaret’s pleasant conversation with Hetty and Maggie’s loathing and misery will likely produce music with abrupt changes of mood. In musically depicting each character, as well as the comic and “tragic” elements of the play, I anticipate using a mutable musical language, one that shifts quickly to accommodate the broad emotional swings and expressions as the characters interact.

Adapting the libretto myself, I plan to use Gerstenberg’s text as much as possible. My additions will be to allow for brief soliloquy and aria-like moments that balance Gerstenberg’s primarily dialogue driven text. I plan to write the vocal and piano score first, before determining any further orchestration of the score.

The premiere of the opera is currently planned for November 15-16, 2013 in CU’s Atlas Black Box Theatre. In collaboration with Emily Moberly (CU DMA voice candidate), who has agreed to direct the opera, I submitted an Atlas Black Box Event Proposal in February 2011 and was granted the November 2013 production date.

PROJECT GOALS:

There are several goals that I hope to fulfill in choosing this project. First, I want more experience writing opera, as it is a genre that I am interested in pursuing, and for which I have the dramatic and compositional aptitude. My background experiences include one previous opera collaboration with a composer colleague (*The Lady or the Tiger*, 2006), and numerous musical theatre projects with various lyricists and playwrights. This project seems a way of putting together the skills I’ve been working on throughout my compositional output to date.

Secondly, I will test my dramatic and musical instincts to see if I can craft a convincing operatic work myself. Many of my song cycles, vocal chamber works and choral piece have theatrical elements that reach toward being operatic, but mostly stay within the scope of 10-15 minutes. Managing the ebb and flow of an artistic work over 50 minutes of time is a different matter than shorter pieces, and I want to work on this aspect of my skills.

Also, I want to write an opera with future staging potential. *The Clever Artifice of Harriet and Margaret* features a small cast of four females and modest stage requirements that may optimize its feasibility for production at universities and small opera companies. I consider *The Clever Artifice of Harriet and Margaret* to have embedded layers of meaning, but delivered with a generally entertaining demeanor. The comic nature of the work may be of interest at a time when the new operas I am acquainted with primarily feature somber subject matter.