

AN APPROACH TO THE CRITICAL EVALUATION OF SETTINGS  
OF THE POETRY OF WALT WHITMAN:  
LOWELL LIEBERMANN'S *SYMPHONY NO. 2*

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Walt Whitman's poetry continues to inspire composers of choral music, and the growing collection of musical settings necessitates development of a standard evaluative tool. Critical evaluation of the musical settings of Whitman's work is difficult because the extensive body of verse is complex and of uneven quality, and lack of common text among compositions makes comparison problematical. The diversity of musical styles involved further complicates the issue. Previous studies have focused on either ideology or style, but none have united the two critical approaches, thus restricting potential for deeper understanding of the music. This study proposes an approach to critical evaluation of Whitman settings that applies hermeneutics, or a blend of analysis and criticism, to the process. The hermeneutic approach includes an examination of the interrelationship between musical form and style and the composer's ideology, which is revealed through his/her treatment of Whitman's poetry and analyzed in light of cultural influences.

Lowell Liebermann (b. 1961) has composed a large scale choral/orchestral setting of Whitman texts in his *Symphony No. 2*, opus 67 (1999). The selection, placement, and treatment of poetry in *Symphony No. 2* provide a window into the composer's mind and his place in the current musical climate. Liebermann's setting reveals his interest in Whitman's search for spirituality and the human spirit's transcendence over time and space. His understanding of Whitman is filtered through a postmodern cynicism, which he seeks to remedy with his nostalgic neo-Romantic style. Chapter One provides an

introduction to Whitman's life and examination of his poetry's themes, style, and reception. Chapter Two outlines issues relevant to criticism of Whitman settings and proposes an approach to critical analysis. Chapter Three applies the critical method to Liebermann's Second Symphony, drawing conclusions about its place in contemporary culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman's verse has been set to music more than any other American poet. As of 1993, the total number of Whitman musical settings was in excess of 1,200 works, by more than 500 composers.<sup>1</sup> Whitman's image as the quintessential voice of the American spirit, his frequent use of musical terminology, and the organic structure of his free verse seem to ignite the creative spark in many composers, while his intimate voice inspires their deeply personal response. Composers' reactions are not only individual, but conditioned by culture:

The response to Whitman is mediated through a host of factors including race, history, class, nationality, gender, and sexuality. What Whitman seems to have provided for readers of varied backgrounds and allegiances is a sense of *enablement*.<sup>2</sup>

Composers apparently feel "enabled" to adapt Whitman's themes to their personal condition or ideology. In one such example, American composer John Adams reportedly wrote his setting of "Wound Dresser" (1989) after watching his mother care for his Alzheimer-stricken father. Critics later gave the piece a more universal application by calling it a commentary on the AIDs crisis.<sup>3</sup> Whitman's voice paradoxically engenders both individual and universal response with an intensity that has proven timeless. His Civil War could be *any* war—indeed any crisis, whether national or personal. In Richard

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<sup>1</sup> Fredrick Berndt, ed., *The Bulletin of the Walt Whitman Music Library* (San Francisco: Walt Whitman Music Library, 1993), cited in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York; London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 439.

<sup>2</sup> Robert K. Martin, ed., *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), xvii.

<sup>3</sup> *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Whitman's Influence on Music" by Lyman L. Leathers.

Danielpour's *An American Requiem* (2001), dedicated to victims of the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States, the aptness of the following inclusion from "Dirge for Two Veterans" may be coincidental. As one reviewer noted, however, it confirms the transcendence of Whitman's message:

The last sunbeam  
Lightly falls from the finish'd Sabbath,  
On the pavement here, and there beyond it is looking,  
Down a new-made double grave.<sup>4</sup>

The undimmed enthusiasm in composers' responses to Whitman, and the ever-growing collection of musical settings of his poetry, necessitate development of a standard evaluative tool.

Despite Whitman's widespread appeal among composers, critical evaluation of the numerous musical settings of his work is difficult. The familiar conception of Whitman as the plain-speaking voice of the common man is not necessarily confirmed upon study of the poetry. The extensive body of verse is complex and of uneven quality, and lack of common text among compositions makes comparison of musical settings problematical. The broad array of musical styles spanning more than a century of compositions further complicates the issue. Previous studies have focused on either ideology or musical style, but none have united the two critical approaches. Several major studies have examined musical analogies in the poetry, such as Robert D. Faner's *Walt Whitman and Opera* (1951). Charmenz Lenhart looked at composers' response to Whitman's musical metaphors in *Musical Influence on American Poetry* (1956), and Lou

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Danielpour, notes for *An American Requiem*, Pacific Symphony Orchestra/Pacific Chorale, Carl St. Clair, conductor (Reference Recordings Compact disc RR-97CD, 2002).

Stem Mize focused exclusively on the relationship of choral techniques to poetic imagery in his Ph.D. dissertation, “A Study of Selected Choral Settings of Walt Whitman Poems” (1967). John Wannamaker’s monumental dissertation, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Study of Theme, Structure, and Prosody” (1972) surveyed over 400 choral settings for common themes and compositional techniques, but avoided detailed discussion of individual works. John F. Warren compared and contrasted musical settings in his recent dissertation, “Four Twentieth-Century Choral Settings of Walt Whitman’s Poems by American Composers” (1999). Such studies exclude significant consideration of composers’ ideologies or cultural influences that may have shaped their musical response to Whitman, thus restricting their potential for deeper understanding of the music.

The present study proposes an approach to critical evaluation of Whitman settings that applies hermeneutics, defined as a blend of analysis and criticism, to the process. This model strives for a balance between musical and extra-musical factors in the quest for intuitive knowledge of a composition. Although it begins with traditional musical analysis, the hermeneutic approach reaches further by examining the interrelationship between musical form and style and the composer’s ideology, which is revealed through his or her treatment of Whitman’s poetry and analyzed in light of cultural influences. For example, Frederick Delius’ choice of texts for *Sea Drift* (1904) was likely influenced by his anti-Christian sensibility and lifelong battle with illness, as well as by British-flavored Whitman enthusiasm, which idealized the poet’s mystical qualities and ignored the earthy ones. If extra-musical influences such as these are considered along with musical elements of form and style, a deeper understanding of both the whole work and its

component parts becomes possible. Since conclusions about a century-old work like *Sea Drift* can be more easily reached in this manner with the benefit of hindsight, the current study will establish the viability of the hermeneutic approach by applying it to a relatively new piece.

American composer Lowell Liebermann (b. 1961) has composed one of the most recent large scale choral/orchestral settings of Whitman texts in his *Symphony No. 2*, opus 67, completed in 1999 and premiered in February 2000 by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. Liebermann's commercial success is evidence of his music's relevance in today's culture. While critical opinion of his music is divided, the response of audiences and performers is overwhelmingly positive. Since graduating from Juilliard in 1987, Liebermann has received a steady stream of important commissions, and has a growing collection of music in print and on compact disc. *Symphony No. 2* is a worthy representation of Liebermann's overall musical style. More salient here, the selection, placement, and treatment of text in *Symphony No. 2* provide a valuable window into the composer's mind and insight into his place in the current musical climate. Liebermann's setting reveals his interest in Whitman's search for spiritual connection with the divine, and the human spirit's transcendence over time and space. His understanding of Whitman is filtered through a postmodern cynicism, which he seeks to remedy with his nostalgic neo-Romantic style.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to Whitman's life and work, fundamental to understanding any musical setting of his verse. The poetry is examined for dominant themes, style, and reception. Chapter 2 outlines issues relevant to criticism of Whitman settings, and proposes an approach to critical analysis, using twentieth-century

compositions as examples. Chapter 3 applies the proposed critical method to Liebermann's Second Symphony, and draws conclusions about the work's place in contemporary culture. The author hopes that both the method and the conclusions will serve as models for future studies of Whitman settings.

A wealth of resources available on Whitman, Lowell Liebermann, and musical critical analysis were utilized in the present study. Authoritative studies, including Gay Wilson Allen's *A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman* (1970), and James E. Miller's *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (1957), provided introduction to Whitman scholarship, as did literary dictionaries and encyclopedias such as *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (ed. Unger, 1974), *Encyclopedia of American Poetry* (ed. Haralson, 1998), *Critical Survey of Poetry* (ed. Magill, 1992), and *The Columbia History of American Poetry* (ed. Parini, 1993). The 1998 *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (ed. LeMaster and Kummings) proved especially valuable, with articles and analysis of individual poems written by leading twentieth-century Whitman scholars. More recent works confirmed the continuing influence of Whitman's poetry and identified the latest scholarly trends. Of particular interest were Robert K. Martin's *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life* (1992), David S. Reynolds' *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman* (2000), and the Whitman chapter in Jack Sullivan's *New World Symphonies: How American Culture Changed European Music* (1999).

Ian D. Bent's articles on analysis and hermeneutics in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (ed. Sadie, 2001) served as entry into issues in music criticism. Articles and books by musicologists Lawrence Kramer, Leo Treitler, Leonard Meyer, and Joseph Kerman clarified the current study's critical approach. Kramer's

volume, *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood* (2000), acknowledges Whitman's special appeal to twentieth-century composers, and evolution of his poetry as it addresses modern problems. Contributing authors take a hermeneutic approach in seeking to understand the relationship of culture, music, and poetry. Comparison of the six composers' works represented in Chapter 2 was assisted by standard biographies such as Michael Kennedy's *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (1964) and Andrea Olmstead's *Roger Sessions and His Music* (1985), while study of recordings and scores of the selected pieces reinforced this author's conclusions.

The increasing availability of information about Lowell Liebermann and his music greatly facilitated this study. Two dozen performance reviews and feature articles provided insight into Liebermann's reputation, style and reception. Liner notes in available recordings, while not necessarily scholarly, indicated the depth of many performers' respect for the composer. Liebermann has an impressive amount of music in print, thanks to his exclusive contract with Theodore Presser. Presser's website (<http://www.presser.com/composers/liebermann.html>) includes biographical material, works published, and contact information for rental scores and parts. Liebermann's personal website (<http://www.lowellliebermann.com>) features a complete works list, discography, biography, and information about upcoming performances. Four dissertations on Liebermann have been completed to date. Lisa R. McArthur's Ph.D. document, "Lowell Liebermann: His Compositional Style as Derived from Three Flute Works and Applied to Other Selected Instrumental Works" (1999) contains detailed musical analyses of two works from each broad instrumental category: solo piano, chamber, concerto, and orchestral. Jeannine Marie Dennis' D.M.A. thesis, "The Life and

Music of Lowell Liebermann with an Emphasis on His Music for the Flute and the Piccolo,” (1999) is primarily a performance guide, while Lisa Michelle Garner’s “Lowell Liebermann: A Stylistic Analysis and Discussion of the Sonata for Flute and Piano, op. 23, Sonata for Flute and Guitar, op. 25, and ‘Soliloquy’ for Flute Solo, op. 44” (1997) traces the creative process from composer to performer. Dean Alan Nichols focuses on romantic traits and derivation of Liebermann’s piano style in “A Survey of the Solo Piano Works of Lowell Liebermann” (2000). Garner appends a valuable annotated bibliography of performance reviews to her study, and both Garner and Nichols provide transcripts of personal interviews with Liebermann. The author’s own interview with Liebermann was extremely helpful in discerning the composer’s musical and philosophical values as well as specific details about the inception of *Symphony No. 2*.

A survey of recent twentieth-century music history textbooks, including Paul Griffiths’ *Modern Music: A Concise History* (1994), Schwartz and Godfrey’s *Music Since 1945: Issues, Materials, and Literature* (1993), and Alastair Williams’ *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* (1997) helped place Liebermann in context of the current culture. Finally, a fascinating view of the present age was provided by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1990).

## CHAPTER 1

### WALT WHITMAN: LIFE, POETRY, AND INFLUENCE

#### Biographical Sketch

Walt Whitman was born 31 May 1819 in West Hills, Long Island, the second of nine children born to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor.<sup>1</sup> His common upbringing and education do not seem to foreshadow his future greatness. His father was a carpenter, whose intermittent periods of employment led to frequent family moves. In 1823 the Whitmans moved to Brooklyn, where Walt received public schooling from 1825 to 1830. Permanently leaving school at age eleven, he took various positions as an office boy and a printer's apprentice to help support the family until 1836. From 1836 to 1841, Whitman filled short-term teaching positions in rural Long Island, worked for several newspapers, and began to take an active interest in politics. His temperance novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*, published in 1842, was by most accounts a formulaic piece of propaganda. 1842 to 1846 brought a series of brief stints at newspapers in New York City and Brooklyn, but it was not until 1846 that Whitman held a stable position as a journalist. As editor of the prominent Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, he wrote Democratic political columns which supported American expansionism and condemned slavery. His sudden departure from the *Daily Eagle* in 1848 led to a brief tenure as editor of the New Orleans *Daily*

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biographical information is compiled from *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (1974), s.v. "Walt Whitman," by Richard Chase; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 3: *Antebellum Writers in New York and the South* (1979), s.v. "Walt Whitman," by Joel Myerson; and *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (1998), s.v. "Chronology," ed. J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings.



*Crescent*, a cosmopolitan position that Whitman eagerly accepted. Returning to New York with his brother Jeff, Whitman founded a “free-soil” newspaper, the *Brooklyn Weekly Freeman*, and was a delegate to the Free-Soil party’s convention in 1848. During the five years preceding the appearance of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Whitman operated a printing office, a bookstore, and a home construction business, and was both a patron of the arts and a freelance writer. His 1851 speech to the Brooklyn Arts Union called for arts appreciation in a materialistic age.

The appearance of *Leaves of Grass* has long invited the question of how such a masterpiece could have arisen from Whitman’s unremarkable background. Some of its inception will no doubt remain a mystery, but there were seeds of inspiration in Walt Whitman’s early life that bore fruit in his first collection of poetry. Although Whitman is not generally seen as religious, he was influenced by religious philosophies of his day. As a young man, Whitman adopted his parents’ interest in the Quaker leader Elias Hicks, who believed that the Inner Light is the path to communication with God. Whitman’s poetic exploration of the Self is the secular equivalent of the Quaker Inner Light.<sup>2</sup> Whitman was greatly influenced by Emerson, who he acknowledged helped him discover himself: “I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil.” A trip to hear Emerson lecture on poetry in 1842 furthered Whitman’s aspirations to be the “American bard” Emerson solicited.<sup>3</sup> The many years Whitman spent in Brooklyn, which

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<sup>2</sup> David S. Reynolds, ed., *A Historical Guide to Walt Whitman* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Pease, “Walt Whitman’s Revisionary Democracy,” in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia Press, 1993), 149-50. Many scholars acknowledge Whitman’s debt to Emerson. See Hyatt Howe Waggoner, *American Poets, From the Puritans to the*

by 1855 was the fourth largest city in the country, and his diverse vocational experience sharpened his eye for the potential metaphors in daily life.<sup>4</sup>

The attempt to identify a dramatic personal epiphany that inspired Whitman's sudden poetic genius has led scholars to examine his relationships leading up to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Other than allusions in the early poetry to a female lover in New Orleans, contrasted with strongly homosexual themes in later editions of *Leaves of Grass*, there is nothing concrete in Whitman's early history to suggest a profound sexual awakening as the source of his inspiration. Perhaps Whitman's erotically explicit poetry was written in rebellion against a sexually repressive father, or simply as a protest against the prevailing Victorian culture.<sup>5</sup> Whitman supported the popular phrenology movement, which emphasized the connection between a healthy body and a healthy soul, likely influencing his body-soul poetic themes.<sup>6</sup>

Whitman's political activism initially arose out of his father's radical socialist views, but he later settled into more moderate Democratic persuasion. He was extremely distressed about the severe political corruption in America in the 1850s. Whitman was also discouraged over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed western territories to sanction slavery, and the infamous capture and punishment of the slave Anthony Burns—an event which Whitman recounts in "A Boston Ballad." According to

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*Present*, Rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); and Jerome Loving, *Emerson, Whitman, and the American Muse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, 17; and Perry D. Lockett, "Walt Whitman," in *Critical Survey of Poetry: English Language Series*, Rev. ed., ed. Frank N. Magill (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, Inc., 1992), vol. 7, 3551.

<sup>5</sup> Pease, 164.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome Loving, "Walt Whitman," in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (Chicago; London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 473.

David Reynolds, the publication of *Leaves of Grass* was Whitman's direct response to the social climate at the time. "Faced by what he considered the disunity and fragmentation of American society, he offered his poetry as a gesture of healing and togetherness."<sup>7</sup>

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, with 1000 printed copies. It contained a preface and twelve untitled poems, the greatest of which was the 1336-line poem later titled "Song of Myself." Public response was polarized. The startling new style of writing caused much discussion and some disdain. Charles Eliot Norton's review appearing in *Putnam's Monthly* described it as a

curious and lawless collection of poems . . . neither in rhyme nor blank verse, but in a sort of excited prose broken into lines without any attempt at measure or regularity, and, as many readers will perhaps think, without any idea of sense or reason.<sup>8</sup>

The Boston *Intelligencer* review called it a "heterogeneous mass of bombast, egotism, vulgarity and nonsense."<sup>9</sup> The reviews noted the volume's sexual frankness with discomfort, or in the case of the religious press, outrage. Whitman himself wrote three anonymous reviews, including the one in the *United States Review*, which hailed Whitman as "An American bard at last!"<sup>10</sup> *Leaves of Grass* was received enthusiastically by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Upon receipt of a complimentary copy, Emerson wrote

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<sup>7</sup> Reynolds, 26-7.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Eliot Norton, "Whitman's Leaves of Grass," *Putnam's Monthly: A Magazine of Literature, Science and Art* 6 (Sept. 1855), 321-3, cited in Kenneth M. Price, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, *Boston Intelligencer* (3 May 1856), cited in Myerson, 356.

<sup>10</sup> [Walt Whitman], "Walt Whitman and His Poems," *United States Review* 5 (Sept. 1855), 205-12, cited in Price, 8.

Whitman, saying it was “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career.”<sup>11</sup>

The second edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared in 1856, containing twenty new poems and Emerson’s letter, printed without permission. The new poems included “Song of the Open Road” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” which are representative of the edition’s theme of the “exaltation of America’s spiritual and physical progress.”<sup>12</sup> From 1859 to 1860, Whitman was a frequent patron at Pfaff’s bohemian restaurant, where he is thought to have formed homosexual relationships. The influence of those associations is apparent in the third edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1860 by Thayer and Eldridge. Some critics acknowledge this edition as Whitman’s most autobiographically revealing, mainly due to the homoerotic *Calamus* poems.<sup>13</sup> Other additions to the third edition included a group of poems celebrating heterosexual love, *Enfans d’Adam*, and “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.”

The start of the Civil War in 1861 had a profound effect on Whitman. Upon learning of his brother George’s being wounded at Fredericksburg in 1862, Whitman went to find him and subsequently moved to Washington, D. C. For the next three years, he visited 80,000-100,000 hospitalized soldiers, while holding minor government jobs in Washington.<sup>14</sup> *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*, published in 1865, reflect

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, letter to Walt Whitman, 21 July 1855, cited in Gay Wilson Allen, *A Reader’s Guide to Walt Whitman* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 53-4.

<sup>12</sup> Pease, 163; Myerson, 357.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, 63.

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds, 35.

Whitman's emotional journey from patriotic enthusiasm to profound sorrow during the Civil War, and his response to Lincoln's assassination.

The war years also put Whitman at the center of a personal controversy. The sexual content of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* ultimately cost Whitman his government job. His benefactor and friend William O'Connor published *The Good Gray Poet* in Whitman's defense in 1866. The "Good Gray Poet" label helped establish Whitman's fame, as did the increased sales of *Leaves of Grass* that resulted from the scandal. During these years Whitman formed a close relationship with eighteen-year-old Peter Doyle, a streetcar operator.

The next few editions of *Leaves of Grass* showed Whitman hard at work to perfect and organize what he viewed as his legacy. As his "Good Gray Poet" image began to catch on in the United States, Whitman's reception in England began to flourish. At the same time the fourth edition was being printed in New York in 1867, the London *Chronicle* carried William Michael Rossetti's favorable article on Whitman. Rossetti's 1868 abridged version of *Leaves of Grass* was instrumental in Whitman's subsequent popularity in England. The 1871 fifth edition included *Drum-Taps* and *Inscriptions*, and yet another reorganization of the poetry. Whitman also published *Passage to India* and the prose work, *Democratic Vistas*, in 1871.

The last two decades of Whitman's life were characterized by recurrent health problems, increased fame, important visitors, travel and lecturing, and the constant efforts to produce a definitive edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Following a stroke in 1873 that temporarily incapacitated him, and the death of his beloved mother, Whitman moved to Camden, New Jersey to live with his brother George. The sixth, or "Centennial," edition

(1876) was essentially a reprint of the fifth. The seventh edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which has the final arrangement of the poetry, was slated to be published in 1881 by James Osgood. Osgood was a highly reputable publisher, but withdrew when threatened by a lawsuit over the poetry's obscene content. Printing was then completed by the Philadelphia publisher Rees Welsh. The eighth edition (1888) differed only in the addition of *Specimen Days, Collect*, and *November Boughs. Good-Bye, My Fancy* and the so-called "Deathbed Edition" of *Leaves of Grass* were published in 1892, with Whitman's express wish that no more changes would occur. Having been in declining health for years, Walt Whitman caught pneumonia and died of multiple causes 26 March 1892.

### Contribution and Influence

The steady stream of fans making pilgrimage to see Whitman, the "sage of Camden," in his later years, and the rapid appearance of biographies and critical evaluations of his works after his death foreshadowed the depth and longevity of his influence on literature and American culture. His main contributions were in the innovations he made to the form and language of verse, the creation of a lasting image of the American identity, and breaking cultural and literary barriers with sexual themes. His poetry has also had lasting influence because of the ability of his themes to transcend changing times and remain relevant to generations of readers. His influence on American poetry is evidenced by the wealth of references and tributes paid to Whitman in the genre, seen in Perlman, Folsom and Campion's collection of over 100 poets' responses to

Whitman from Ezra Pound to Allen Ginsberg.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps, as Donald Pease asserts, “American poetry may be read as a series of reactions to Whitman.”<sup>16</sup>

The innovations Whitman made in verse include the invention of free verse, discussed in detail below, bold new use of language and diction, and the uncommon intimacy by which he sought to communicate with the reader. Whitman wants the reader to feel he is talking directly to him alone—even, as Gay Wilson Allen suggests, “making love to his readers by means of words.”<sup>17</sup> Typical of this intentional intimacy is a passage from “Song of Myself”:

This hour I tell things in confidence,  
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.<sup>18</sup>

The first person familiarity gives the verse a timelessness that continues to elicit emotional response from the reader.

The persistent perception of Whitman as quintessentially American has contributed to his enormous popularity and endurance. Whitman saw himself as American through and through:

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the  
same.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion, eds., *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, Rev. ed. (Duluth MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Pease, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Allen, 67.

<sup>18</sup> Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Whitman Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1982), 206. Kaplan’s edition includes the 1855 and 1892 editions of *Leaves of Grass*, as well as the 1892 *Complete Prose Works*. For the sake of simplicity, all Whitman excerpts will be cited from this edition, hereafter designated *WPP*.

<sup>19</sup> *WPP*, 188.

His idealized notion of American character as “proud, independent, self-possessed, generous and gentle” has continued to resonate with his audience.<sup>20</sup>

*Leaves of Grass* broke through sexual barriers with its unparalleled erotic language and frequent use of sexual metaphors. Interestingly, it was the heterosexual themes rather than the homoerotic material that nineteenth-century critics found most objectionable. For example, “The Dalliance of the Eagles” was banned for its fairly tame description of mating eagles, while most of the *Calamus* set was retained.<sup>21</sup>

The endurance of Whitman’s voice is in large part due to the adaptability of his ideas to a changing world. Themes of the nature of being, the role of the individual in society, the reality of war, and the inevitability of death have proven relevant up to the present age, and no doubt will continue to do so. But how the themes are received changes based on the viewpoint of the reader and his or her cultural and personal environment. The generation immediately after Whitman assigned prophetic, even Messianic significance to his verse, while everyone from Freudians to feminists to the gay community has used him to champion his/her viewpoints.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Allen, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Reynolds, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.



## Themes

### Self

There is general consensus that the 1855 and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass* are the most inspired, in part because the theme of selfhood is predominant. The centerpiece of the first edition, “Song of Myself,” is an epic-length celebration of the self. Whitman engages in three dialogues of self-awareness: the self and the physical world, the self and others, and the self and spirit.<sup>23</sup> Whitman finds the self first in the human body. His view departs from Emerson’s New England Transcendentalism in that the physical body is as important as the soul, and is celebrated in its natural state:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am  
touch’d from,  
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,  
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.  
If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own  
body . . .<sup>24</sup>

The self’s identification with others is so extreme, it actually *becomes* others, leading to an epiphany in which true love and brotherhood are seen as the fullest realization of the self. The idealized self exists apart from time and space, and ultimately achieves oneness with God.

### Spiritual Democracy

By celebrating the true self, and recognizing the equality of others, a “spiritual democracy” will be achieved. From *Inscriptions* we learn that Whitman’s ideal American character is a blend of the self with others:

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<sup>23</sup> Allen, 151-2.

<sup>24</sup> *WPP*, 211.

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.<sup>25</sup>

“The democratic paradox is the central metaphor of *Leaves of Grass*,” writes Richard Chase; the paradox is that the democratic man has to be true to both himself and all men.<sup>26</sup> Themes of equality prevail throughout the poetry. Whitman frequently employs the motif of the common man as a trope of democracy, and his joining of genders, classes, and nationalities in his catalogues is a great equalizer.<sup>27</sup> American types and images are an important aspect of Whitman’s democratic theme. The qualities of Americanness such as strength, nature, and pioneering spirit are what make the United States worthy of a new poetry.<sup>28</sup> But ultimately, a *spiritual* democracy that transcends race and nationality is the key to the “upward progression of souls toward the reality of God.”<sup>29</sup>

## War

For Whitman, slavery and political corruption in the United States in the 1850s made a spiritual democracy impossible. He saw the Civil War as an opportunity to unite the country and cure its social ills. His identification of President Lincoln as the country’s

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<sup>25</sup> *WPP*, 165.

<sup>26</sup> Chase, 332.

<sup>27</sup> Louis L. Martz, *The Poem of the Mind: Essays on Poetry, English and American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 88-9.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Clarke Owens, “Charles Ives and His American Context: Images of ‘Americanness’ in the Arts” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999), 22-4.

<sup>29</sup> John Samuel Wannamaker, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Study of Theme, Structure, and Prosody” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 103.

savior transformed his assassination into redemption for the United States.<sup>30</sup> The primary source of Whitman's war poetry is *Drum-Taps*, a thematic and stylistic departure from *Leaves of Grass* in that it related more directly to current events and adopted more conventional poetic form. The early poems in *Drum-Taps* show Whitman's eagerness for war—an enthusiasm apparently shared by most Americans at the outset of the Civil War:<sup>31</sup>

War! an arm'd race is advancing! the welcome for battle, no turning away;  
War! be it weeks, months, or years, an arm'd race is advancing to  
welcome it.<sup>32</sup>

Sounds of drums, bugles and march, as in “Beat! Beat! Drums!” pervade the early poems. In “The Wound-Dresser” Whitman's purpose shifts from rallying troops to expressing the pain and reality of the war:

I onward go, I stop,  
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,  
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,  
One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you,  
Yet think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save  
you.<sup>33</sup>

Whitman's thousands of hospital visits during the war resulted in poetry that reveals a deep identification with the soldier. For him the loving, physical relationships among

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<sup>30</sup> Reynolds, 35.

<sup>31</sup> John M. Picker, “‘Red War Is My Song’: Whitman, Higginson, and Civil War Music,” in *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood*, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 3-5.

<sup>32</sup> *WPP*, 418.

<sup>33</sup> *WPP*, 444.

soldiers were salve for the horrors of war, and those who died performed a noble redemption for the survivors.<sup>34</sup>

### The Poet as Prophet

Whitman's view of himself as a prophet was not unlike the biblical prophet, who interprets the Divine will to mankind.<sup>35</sup> For Whitman, the sad state of contemporary American life called for a poet-prophet to lead the people out of the morass, both representing and redeeming the people.<sup>36</sup> As prophet, he saw his function as religious: "I too, following many and follow'd by many, inaugurate a religion . . . ."<sup>37</sup> The religion is the worship of the self and the establishment of a spiritual democracy. Whitman knew the democratic world he sought would not be achieved solely by him, so he called on future poets to "justify" him:

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before  
known,  
Arouse! for you must justify me.<sup>38</sup>

That the unrealistic idealism of Whitman's new religion precluded its chance for success does not lessen the potency of his prophetic voice.

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<sup>34</sup> Lockett, 3559.

<sup>35</sup> Martz, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Hisako Yamauchi, "Walt Whitman," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 64: *American Literary Critics and Scholars, 1850-1880*, ed. John W. Rathbun and Monica M. Green (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1988), 279.

<sup>37</sup> *WPP*, 180.

<sup>38</sup> *WPP*, 175.

## Sexuality

In an open letter to Emerson in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman announced what Gay Wilson Allen terms his “sex program”—his intent to break the barriers of what was considered proper by writing frankly about sex and sexuality, calling the previous omission of sexual topics in literature “filthy.” In the letter, Whitman writes,

I say that the body of a man or woman, the main matter is so far quite unexpressed in poems; but that the body is to be expressed, and sex is.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps, as discussed above, his intent to address sexuality arose from the phrenology movement, or was a rebellion against a repressive Victorian society. Or perhaps Whitman had a more personal reason related to his own unsatisfied sexual appetites or closeted homosexuality, a theory that has spawned a major branch of Whitman study. The term “homosexual” was not even used until 1892, and the question of Whitman’s sexuality is unclear because nineteenth-century society was generally more accepting of same-sex physical affection than the twentieth.<sup>40</sup> Thus for Whitman to write about embracing and kissing soldiers was not particularly unusual. But the overt homoeroticism and authentic emotional ring in the *Calamus* poetry as compared to the somewhat stilted exploration of heterosexuality and procreation in *Children of Adam* has long substantiated the evidence for Whitman’s homosexuality:

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<sup>39</sup> Walt Whitman, cited in Allen, 58.

<sup>40</sup> Reynolds, 40.

And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming,  
O then I was happy,  
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourish'd me  
more, and the beautiful day pass'd well,  
And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my  
friend,  
And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually  
up the shores,  
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me  
whispering to congratulate me,  
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the  
cool night,  
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,  
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.<sup>41</sup>

But identifying Whitman as a homosexual is a minor part of the picture. For Whitman, honest sexuality was an essential step toward self-discovery and ultimate oneness with God; to take pleasure in sex was to connect with the spiritual world as well.<sup>42</sup> Sexuality also relates to Whitman's prophetic vision. Perry Lockett notes that the theme of procreation in *Children of Adam* is about more than the physical world—it is also the “metaphorical insemination of the poet's words and spirit into national life.”<sup>43</sup> Thus Whitman's “sex program” was a vital component of his perceived mission as prophet, bard, and redeemer.

## Death

Whitman's preoccupation with death is consistent throughout his poetry—a concern very much in keeping with the high mortality rates in his era and the added influence of the Civil War. While Whitman's strong emphasis on the transcendent soul

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<sup>41</sup> *WPP*, 276-7.

<sup>42</sup> Allen, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Lockett, 3556.

reveals his belief in immortality, he does not specify what form the after-life will take. There is no clear mention of heaven or hell, but after death the soul is somehow transformed into an “omnipresent essence,” or the “dirt under your boot-soles.”<sup>44</sup> The belief that death is a joyous part of the cycle of life, symbolized by a simple blade of grass, is a consistent credo:

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?  
It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is  
Happiness.<sup>45</sup>

Whitman’s concept of death is peaceful, welcome, and sleep-like, as in this famous excerpt from his elegy to President Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”:

Come lovely and soothing death,  
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
Sooner or later delicate death.<sup>46</sup>

Death may be seen as fulfillment of a mission (“Adieu to a Soldier”), a healing act (“Pensive on her Dead”), an unknown journey (“Good-Bye my Fancy!”), or an adventure (“Joy, Shipmate, Joy!”). The poet who celebrates life rejoices in death with characteristic confidence:

Remember my words, I may again return,  
I love you, I depart from materials,  
I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Death” by Harold Aspiz, 166-7.

<sup>45</sup> *WPP*, 246.

<sup>46</sup> *WPP*, 464.

<sup>47</sup> *WPP*, 612.

## Music

While music, *per se*, is not a major theme, music terms, analogies and metaphors are such a common device in Whitman's poetry that they are relevant here. Whitman's designation of himself as the "singer" and his poetry as the "song" is intentional because of the inherent emotional power in the terms.<sup>48</sup> Although scholars argue about how sophisticated Whitman's musical knowledge really was, it is clear that music carried a special meaning for him.<sup>49</sup> A search of *Leaves of Grass* yields more than two hundred musical terms.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, the musical images are often an entry point to Whitman's program, whether it be the transcendent soul ("Proud Music of the Storm"), sexuality ("I Sing the Body Electric"), war ("First O Songs for a Prelude"), or democracy ("I Hear America Singing"). Music is key to Whitman's understanding of spiritual democracy:

Then music, the combiner, nothing more spiritual, nothing more sensuous, a god, yet completely human, advances, prevails, holds highest place; supplying in certain wants and quarters what nothing else could supply . . .<sup>51</sup>

Whitman used musical metaphors to seize the imagination of the universal audience for whom he believed he was writing. His inclusion of such diverse images as the "trained

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<sup>48</sup> Charmenz Lenhart, *Musical Influences on American Poetry* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1956), 168, 172.

<sup>49</sup> For two opposing viewpoints, see Lenhart, 161-209; and Mortimer H. Frank, "Music in American Literary History: A Survey of the Significance of Music in the Writings of Eight American Literary Figures" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1968), 40-87.

<sup>50</sup> Frank, 49.

<sup>51</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, cited in Lenhart, 208.



soprano,” “German airs of friendship,” “symphony,” and “bugle-call,” is a macro-metaphor for his spiritual democracy in which all people are equal.

### Form and Structure

The creation of a radically new form and style of poetry was a part of Whitman’s self-appointed prophetic mission as the New World poet.<sup>52</sup> His poetic efforts before 1855 were conventional and of unremarkable quality. But with the appearance of his “excited prose broken into lines without any attempt at measure or regularity” in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman revolutionized American poetry. The change was so dramatic that contemporary readers and critics did not know how to classify the poetry. Problems of classification continue, partly because of the astonishing variety in the oeuvre. Ironically, Whitman’s most popular poem “O Captain! My Captain!” atypically has regular rhyme and meter, and as such is usually condemned as one of his least distinguished. The rambling 1336-line “Song of Myself” defies classification; containing stanzas from one to sixty-six lines, it has variously been called lyric and epic.<sup>53</sup> The poetry generally grew shorter and more conservative through Whitman’s life, and according to many scholars, lost its edge after the 1860 edition. The constant evolution of Whitman’s persona in the poetry compounds the problems of analysis. He shifts from shockingly intimate dialogue with the imagined reader, to long pontifications on current culture, to detached mysticism—often within the same poem. But even though the form and structure of the poetry constantly vary, Whitman employs certain techniques and patterns that may be identified.

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<sup>52</sup> Allen, 157.

<sup>53</sup> Loving, 472.

## Free verse and poetic diction

Gay Wilson Allen describes Whitman's medium as "expressive form," referring to a process rather than a predetermined rhythmic or linguistic pattern. "Free verse" simply refers to the absence of rhyme and meter. But there is a system in use, and Allen terms it "clausal prosody" or "thought rhythm." In this form, a verse is equal to a statement or clause, and the verses are spaced as if they were rhymed. For example, in "Song of Myself," each line is a clause, and each complete sentence constitutes a strophe:

I celebrate myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.<sup>54</sup>

Many scholars have noted the similarity of the form to Biblical prose. Stanza length varied so much because a stanza was based on a single theme of indeterminate length. After 1860, Whitman began to number stanzas or sections, and organize clusters of poems according to their subject. Another innovation Whitman made to the form of verse was his surprising use of language, importing terms from foreign language, using colloquialisms and slang, and peppering the poems with place names, apparently for sheer enjoyment of their sound. He invented new words, sometimes by adding suffixes, converting nouns to verbs and vice versa, and forming new compounds.

## Prosody and syntax

Sound patterning, or prosody, is a significant aspect of Whitman scholarship. Whitman does use patterns of syllabic stress to convey the meaning of the poetry, but uses no predetermined system or meter. For example, the placement of stressed and

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<sup>54</sup> Walt Whitman, cited in Allen, 50, 160-7.

unstressed syllables in the title line of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” contributes to the rocking sensation implied by the text.<sup>55</sup> In “Beat! Beat! Drums!” the equally stressed syllables in the title line, repeated at the beginning of each strophe, reinforce the march-like, martial theme.<sup>56</sup> Sculley Bradley observed a pyramid structure in some of the poems, achieved by increasing numbers of accented syllables in succeeding lines to a peak, with a corresponding decrease to the end. Rhythm can be applied metaphorically as well: “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” has been described as having “grammatical rhythm,” in which the interplay of past, present and future tenses results in a timelessness central to the poem’s meaning.<sup>57</sup> Syntax and inverted word order are also important to Whitman’s technique, for example in the *Calamus* poem “We Two Boys Together Clinging”:

We two boys together clinging,  
One the other never leaving,  
.....  
Fulfilling our foray.<sup>58</sup>

The placement of the present participle at the end of each clause throughout the poem emphasizes the relationship of the boys as well as a sense of motion; when the pattern is broken for the final line, “Fulfilling our foray,” the effect is dramatic.

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<sup>55</sup> Frank, 78.

<sup>56</sup> Loving, 475.

<sup>57</sup> Frank, 80-1, 84.

<sup>58</sup> *WPP*, 282.

## Techniques of repetition

The organizational principle for Whitman's free verse is repetition, which encompasses individual words, parallelism, and cataloguing. The repetition of a word or words at the beginning of lines (*anaphora*) is a standard unifying tool:

O powerful western fallen star!  
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!  
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!  
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.<sup>59</sup>

*Epiphora* refers to the placement of repeated words at the end of a line:

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.<sup>60</sup>

More often there is a subtle combination of both techniques, shaded by elisions between phrases. Parallelism refers to a two-to-four-line sequence of coordinate clauses with parallel ideas within the lines, such as in the second strophe of "Song of Myself":

I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.<sup>61</sup>

Richard Chase compares this parallelism to Psalm 8:

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou  
visitest him?  
For thou has made him a little lower than the angels, and has crowned him  
with glory and honor.  
Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast  
put all things under his feet.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *WPP*, 459.

<sup>60</sup> *WPP*, 190.

<sup>61</sup> *WPP*, 188.

<sup>62</sup> Chase, 337.

Whitman's use of parallelism is extremely diverse. Sometimes the first and last lines of a stanza are parallel, resulting in a rounded form, as in "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame."<sup>63</sup>

Whitman's famous catalogues or extensive lists are based on parallelism and repetition involving more than four lines, and can have parallel clauses, phrases, or both, as in section 33 of "Song of Myself." His catalogues at their best display the ability of language to epitomize the "all-inclusiveness of American democracy" and have a logical chain of thought.<sup>64</sup>

#### Imagery, symbolism, and rhetorical devices

Whitman's use of imagery and symbolism reveal a masterful manipulation of ideas. Perhaps the greatest example is found in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," his elegy for President Lincoln. Whitman uses three symbols, the lilac, the star, and the thrush, to mourn the dead president, but the genius is found in the way the symbols change and overlap. The lilac is a symbol of rebirth, spring and resurrection, the star represents the fallen president, and the thrush symbolizes the meaning of life and the poet's voice. Whitman uses form to symbolize concepts as well. John Picker suggests that in "Dirge for Two Veterans" the four-line stanzas consisting of two longer lines framed by single shorter lines symbolize the "central placement of the two coffins in the procession, and more specifically, the formal, deliberate steps of the march."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> John F. Warren, "Four Twentieth-Century Settings of Walt Whitman's Poems by American Composers" (D.M.A. diss., University of Miami, 1999), 17.

<sup>64</sup> *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Catalogues" by John B. Mason, 107-8.

<sup>65</sup> Picker, 7.

I see a sad procession,  
And I hear the sound of coming full-key'd bugles,  
All the channels of the city streets they're flooding,  
As with voices and with tears.<sup>66</sup>

Whitman uses rhetorical devices of first and third person, either to persuade the reader to draw closer or to detach himself, and the form of a dialogue is frequently employed. In "Song of Myself" the soul is alternately in dialogue with itself, with the body and with all of mankind, conveying the cosmic nature of the question "What am I?"<sup>67</sup>

#### Influence of musical forms

The question of the relationship of Whitman's verse to musical forms has fascinated scholars for decades. It arises from Whitman's frequently professed love of music, his liberal use of musical terms and analogies, and scholars' need to find identifiable forms in his verse. Whitman had a well-known love of opera, attended numerous performances, and was a great fan of contralto Marietta Alboni. Robert D. Faner (*Walt Whitman and Opera*) theorizes that Whitman's musical sophistication, demonstrated in the naming of thirty musical works in his writings, meant he was trying to imitate musical forms in his verse. This theory persisted in the twentieth century. Georgiana Pollak compared Whitman's accentual patterns to English translations of Italian opera.<sup>68</sup> Many scholars have noted the recitative/aria-like alternation of narration with mockingbird song in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Richard Chase goes further in suggesting that the poem's opening is analogous to an opera overture in laying

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<sup>66</sup> *WPP*, 448.

<sup>67</sup> Chase, 337-8.

<sup>68</sup> Frank, 49, 71, 42, 81.

out the poem's main themes.<sup>69</sup> "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" seems to have a symphonic scope with its statement and development of themes, symbols, and rhythms, and the coda-like function of its ending.

Since the late 1950s, however, the search for concrete musical forms in Whitman's verse has subsided in favor of a general agreement that although analogies exist, there is no evidence to support the idea that Whitman was intentionally imitating musical forms. Most scholars agree the analogy was taken too far, that "an analogy can never be made to perform the transcendent act of turning poetry into music or music into poetry."<sup>70</sup> Mortimer Frank argues convincingly that traces of sonata form are present in many literary works, and that poetry in general is allied to music, particularly with regard to rhythm.<sup>71</sup> Even Charmenz Lenhart, whose study of Whitman's sketchbooks led to her claim that "the key to Whitman's creative technique lies in a search for a musical analogy," admits that the analogy might be motivated by Whitman's emotion rather than specific musical forms. She notes a fascinating thematic similarity and compositional method between Whitman and Beethoven—a method that Whitman termed "organic," and which in Beethoven could be described as a "germ motive" or recurring theme that evolves through repetition and variation. The concept of organicism or germ motive would apply to "Lilacs," when the sonata analogy is too restrictive.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Chase, 343, and Frank, 61-2.

<sup>70</sup> Wannamaker, 65.

<sup>71</sup> Frank, 64-6.

<sup>72</sup> Lenhart, 170-5, 194, 209.

## The “Real” Walt Whitman

“Protean, elusive, slippery, Whitman is everywhere and nowhere at once,” writes Robert Martin; “He is and will be what we have made and will make of him.”<sup>73</sup> Evidence suggests that Whitman consciously created various personae, or as one writer says, he imagined a fictional character, “Walt Whitman,” then spent his life trying to become it.<sup>74</sup> Among his personae were the “Good Gray Poet,” the romantic “Wound Dresser,” the rugged common man, the Christ-like prophet, and the “sage of Camden.” Far from being concerned by these contradictions, Whitman in fact embraced them:<sup>75</sup>

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)<sup>76</sup>

Whitman expected future generations to mold his persona to their needs—a key consideration when exploring musical settings of his poetry.<sup>77</sup> David S. Reynolds explores the cultural influences that shaped Whitman’s persona, contending that Whitman cannot be understood apart from his historical context. For example, Whitman’s desire to be seen as a “rough,” a common man, arose from his experience of the Brooklyn “b’hoys”—slang for boy—who was rough, sensual and loud.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Robert K. Martin, ed., *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman: The Life After the Life* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), xvii-xxiii.

<sup>74</sup> Waggoner, 155.

<sup>75</sup> Chase, 333.

<sup>76</sup> *WPP*, 87.

<sup>77</sup> Pease, 170.

<sup>78</sup> Reynolds, 27.



Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,  
No more modest than immodest.<sup>79</sup>

And although Whitman wanted to be embraced by the common man, he never was. In fact, Whitman's snobbish attitude toward the common country folk he taught in the 1840s belies his later reverence for them, and calls into question his common-man persona.<sup>80</sup>

Whitman's political views are equally murky. As a Free Soil Democrat and American expansionist, he was seemingly a radical,<sup>81</sup> but he actually was quite moderate on slavery. Reynolds contends that Whitman invented his poetic "I" so he could represent either or both sides of an issue at once.<sup>82</sup> Whitman's Civil War "Wound Dresser" persona gave way after the war to an obsession with becoming the "Good Gray Poet" and savior of democracy.<sup>83</sup>

As sexual reformer, Whitman is equally confounding. The ramifications of his relationship with his father are unclear; what has been portrayed as an Oedipal conflict is mitigated by the evidence in his later writings of fond memories of his father.<sup>84</sup> When questioned about his own sexuality, Whitman adamantly denied the homosexual label, claiming to have fathered six children.

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<sup>79</sup> *WPP*, 210.

<sup>80</sup> Allen, 33; Reynolds, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Pease, 150.

<sup>82</sup> Reynolds, 9.

<sup>83</sup> Allen, 92-3.

<sup>84</sup> Reynolds, 16.

The language in Whitman's poetry contributes to the mystique, such as the confusing use of "One's-self" in *Inscriptions* ("One'Self I Sing")—why not "myself?"

The vagueness allows for the adoption of various personae:

Whitman promises to sing "a simple, separate person," yet before we have read very far in *Leaves of Grass* or very much about the poet by his biographers, we see that neither Whitman nor the images of himself that he projects can be described as "simple"—far from it. We discover that the so-called "separate" person, or self, is always merging with other persons or with the "En-Masse" or becoming an abstraction.<sup>85</sup>

That Whitman continually reinvented himself is the essence of the real Whitman, and if it makes him difficult to know, perhaps that is his gift. In his courageous, conflicted, perhaps neurotic search for himself he mirrors America's contradictions.<sup>86</sup> It is Whitman's elusive spirit that has made him so enduring, so adaptable to changing times, and so appealing to composers of musical settings.

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<sup>85</sup> Chase, 331-2.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 335, 353.

## CHAPTER 2

### CRITICAL APPROACH

#### Modes of Evaluation: A Hermeneutic Approach

The question of what constitutes critical analysis carries inherent problems involving terminology and historical precedent. Analysis and criticism are both defined on the basis of objectivity, as well as the degree to which extra-musical factors are considered. Analysis uses the piece of music itself as its starting point, rather than consideration of external factors that may have shaped its composition.<sup>1</sup> The analyst looks for structures in music and compares them within the work and with abstract models. For example, a given composition's sonata-allegro exposition is compared with the theoretical norm for sonata-allegro form, amalgamated from common traits in numerous compositions in a chosen genre or style period. Often the analysis explores how the piece is *like* other pieces or the abstract model, rather than how it differs.<sup>2</sup> The problem with analysis alone is that it tends to subvert a piece's individuality by identifying it with a larger group.<sup>3</sup> Nor is it possible to attain complete objectivity in analysis. This is contrary to Immanuel Kant and Edward Hanslick's Enlightenment

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (hereafter designated *NGD*) provide an excellent overview of the issues involved in critical analysis. See "Analysis" by Ian D. Bent, and "Criticism" by multiple contributors.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Meyer makes the distinction between critical analysis and style analysis: critical analysis attempts to identify what is unique about the piece; whereas style analysis looks for norms. See Leonard B. Meyer, *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Morgan, "Theory, Analysis, and Criticism," *Journal of Musicology* 1 (1982): 16.

philosophy, which argued for complete separation of emotion from determination of aesthetic quality. Even if the analyst is able to set personal feelings aside, s/he still approaches a piece of music from a culturally-conditioned set of values that cannot be completely suppressed. Moreover, the composition is not merely an object, but a snapshot of the composer's mind, shaped by his or her culture.<sup>4</sup>

In the broadest sense, criticism is “the study of the meaning and value of art works.”<sup>5</sup> Although the term has come to refer to newspaper journalism that blends audience education with subjective performance critique, academic criticism is ideally a fusion of description, analysis, interpretation and evaluation.<sup>6</sup> The tasks of analysis and criticism blend in the field of musical hermeneutics, which includes the consideration of external factors in the study of music. Hermeneutics involves an empathetic approach to a work, an attempt to discover and understand its deeper meaning. A brief synopsis of the history of hermeneutics introduces a variety of ideas for consideration in the current study.<sup>7</sup>

Hermeneutics was first defined by Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who discovered both literal and hidden meaning in Biblical texts by considering the author's intention. The term derives from the Greek *hermeneutikos*, which alludes to Hermes, god of eloquence and divination. Historically, hermeneutics

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Morgan, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Summary compiled from *NGD*, s.v. “Hermeneutics,” by Ian D. Bent.

was applied to the search for meaning in ancient Greek myths, Homeric epics, and the literature of the Old and New Testaments. The assumption was that the distance between the text and the reader, caused by passage of time or special qualities of the text (e.g. the Bible as the word of God), required powers of divination for understanding.

Schleiermacher described a dual system in which the source text's components (word, phrase, sentence, etc.) were constantly evaluated in light of the whole text, and the language was examined alternately from a literal/objective or a hidden/subjective perspective. Problems of interpretation were solved by making a shift from part to whole or objective to subjective. He called this process the "hermeneutic circle."

Schleiermacher's biographer Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) contributed the idea of historical awareness to the concept. By examining the context, the author's mind, and socio-cultural circumstances behind a text, one could discover its underlying spirit or essence.

Hermeneutics was appropriated for musical scholarship in 1902 by Hermann Kretzschmar ("Proposals for the Promotion of Musical Hermeneutics"), in which he cited examples of musical hermeneutic analysis in the writings of Zelter, Hoffman, Weber, Wagner, and Schumann. The approach to criticism in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, founded in 1798 by Friedrich Rochlitz, was distinctly hermeneutic. Rochlitz advocated the examination of musical works for their "sense and spirit," "means," and "grammar." E. T. A. Hoffman's famous critical review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in 1810 was essentially a manifestation of the hermeneutic circle. Hoffman investigated the work on two planes: technical detail versus aesthetic effect, and part versus whole. Schumann's review of Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique* in his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*

in 1835 is another example of hermeneutics. It consisted of a general impression, technical assessment, and discussion of the spirit of the work. The belief that an underlying *idea* could be found in Beethoven's works drove the efforts of Wilhelm von Lenz (1852) and A. B. Marx (1859), who looked for clues in the composer's life and artistic development. Twentieth-century proponents of general hermeneutics Heidegger and Gadamer focused on the critic's preconceptions and place in culture. More recent hermeneutic approaches are found in the work of Leonard Meyer, Charles Rosen, Joseph Kerman, Leo Treitler, and Lawrence Kramer.

Hermeneutics has a special application in critical analysis of texted music. Lawrence Kramer describes textual inclusions in music as one type of "hermeneutic window," an entry point into understanding.<sup>8</sup> Since the text in vocal music is subject to interpretation, its treatment in a work is a window through which meaning may be seen.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, the selected text and its treatment in a Whitman setting reveals the unique ideology of the composer, which may then be included in the circular analysis of the whole work and its component parts. The present approach to the critical analysis of vocal music with text by Walt Whitman employs a hermeneutic circle that involves examination from multiple perspectives and levels of objectivity. The circle encompasses exegesis of the source text, analysis of the musical setting, consideration of extra-musical influences on the setting, and postulation of the composer's ideology as it bears upon the

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<sup>8</sup> Kramer lists three kinds of hermeneutic windows: textual inclusions (e.g. titles, annotations, etc.), citational inclusions (e.g. musical quotations), and structural tropes, which occur at points of seeming discontinuity in form. See the chapter "Tropes and Windows" in Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice*, 9-10.

music. These issues may be approached from various vantage points. In order to demonstrate this analytical method, choral settings of Whitman texts will be examined from three angles: the composer, the poem, and ideology.

#### Composer's Perspective: Delius and Vaughan Williams

British composers coming into maturity during the last decade of the nineteenth century were the first to take a particular interest in Whitman's poetry. Although Ralph Vaughan Williams and Frederick Delius had markedly different styles and backgrounds, they found inspiration in many of the same Whitman themes. Vaughan Williams encountered Whitman's poetry while a student at Cambridge in 1892, and he carried a copy of *Leaves of Grass* with him in World War I.<sup>10</sup> Delius was so affected by his introduction to *Leaves of Grass* in 1903 that he immediately began composing *Sea Drift*, arguably one of his most original works.<sup>11</sup> Vaughan Williams and Delius typify certain British sensibilities of their era by regarding Whitman as a mystical, prophetic figure, and by idealizing his characterization of American life as a means of liberation from the constraints of Victorian society.

In championing Walt Whitman, English composers were reacting against a highly restrictive Victorian mindset. William Rossetti's abridged version of *Leaves of Grass* (1868), which omitted most of the poetry making reference to the human body, became

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<sup>10</sup> Byron Adams, "No Armpits, Please, We're British," in *Walt Whitman and Modern Music: War, Desire, and the Trials of Nationhood*, ed. Lawrence Kramer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Sullivan, *New World Symphonies: How American Culture Changed European Music* (New Haven CN; London: Yale University Press, 1999), 102.

for some a symbol of everything that was wrong with their repressed society.<sup>12</sup> The ideological attachment that composers formed with Whitman and what he represented began to translate into cautiously progressive changes in their musical style. “Whitman was ideal for British composers who wanted to be sweaty and forward-looking but were not prepared to embrace the outright assaults on musical propriety exemplified by neoprimitivism or atonal expressionism.”<sup>13</sup> “Sweaty” is an apt metaphor for the British association of Whitman’s more earthy content with their desire for freedom from Victorian convention. Byron Adams’ amusingly titled article, “No Armpits, Please, We’re British,”<sup>14</sup> more specifically contends that composers of Vaughan Williams’ and Delius’ generation gravitated toward Whitman in their desire to prove their masculinity in an era when artists were suspiciously regarded as feminine.<sup>15</sup> The 1895 trial and incarceration of Oscar Wilde for “gross indecency,” and the subsequent societal view of artists as morally suspect eventually led British composers—Vaughan Williams in particular—to create masculine personae. Whitman’s athletic, visionary verse served as the perfect vehicle.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, British composers generally avoided the earthy poetry in favor of prophetic, mystical themes. This avoidance was paralleled by a tendency to

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<sup>12</sup> Adams, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, 99.

<sup>14</sup> “Armpits” refers to this passage from “Song of Myself”: Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from, / The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer, / This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds (*WPP*, 211).

<sup>15</sup> Adams, 30-31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-34.



uphold Whitman as a sage, even a prophet for a revolutionary new religion.<sup>17</sup> Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony* and Delius' *Sea Drift* serve as examples of British composers' predilection for such themes at the turn of the century.

Vaughan Williams' (1872-1958) choice of "Darest Thou Now O Soul" for his first Whitman setting, *Toward the Unknown Region* (1907), is an early indication of his attraction to the mystical search of the soul for fulfillment. This theme is also at the heart of the poetry in *A Sea Symphony* (1910), but here it is cloaked in masculine sea imagery, which Vaughan Williams' eagerly seized upon for his musical ideas. The text for the first movement of four consists of excerpts from "Song of the Exposition" and "Song for All Seas" from *Sea-Drift*. The sea poetry is central to Whitman's search for the soul, and the sea itself is a religious symbol for the divine. Celebrating and exploring the sea becomes a metaphor for man's search for the true soul or for God, a process that results in transcendent freedom.<sup>18</sup> Vaughan Williams' first movement focuses on the sea's splendor and the daring sailors who traverse it. The marvelous opening announcement, "Behold, the sea itself," is brilliantly stated with brass and choral fanfare in a striking Bb-minor to D-major shift, followed by orchestral surges that vividly portray the waves. By placing "On the Beach at Night Alone" as the second movement, Vaughan Williams begins to reveal a deeper connection with Whitman: his interest in man's place in the cosmos, indicated in these lines:<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Kramer, "Like Falling Leaves: The Erotics of Mourning in Four *Drum-Taps* Settings," in *Walt Whitman and Modern Music*, 152.

<sup>18</sup> *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, s.v. "The Sea" by David Kuebrich.

<sup>19</sup> James Day, *Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 187.

This vast similitude spans them, and always has spanned,  
And shall forever span them and compactly hold and enclose them.

After a return to the powerful images of sea and ships in the vigorous third movement *Scherzo* (Whitman's "After the Sea-ship"), Vaughan Williams uses excerpts from "Passage to India" in the symphony's culminating fourth movement. The poetic excerpts describe the soul preparing to set sail—to rise above time and space, and move toward the unknown in search of full knowledge of self, life, and death. Vaughan Williams treats the coming journey as a joyous, welcome adventure. The musical climax at "Finally shall come the poet worthy that name, The true son of God shall come singing his songs" shows Vaughan Williams' idealistic elevation of Whitman to god-like bearer of a new religion.

Vaughan Williams' choice of text exposes his agnosticism. In editing the original poems for inclusion in the finale, he omitted "Ah more than any priest O soul we too believe in God," but included a verse that advocated reliance on self over God: "Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God . . . But that I, turning, call to thee O soul, thou actual Me." Byron Adams links the "tonal and expressive ambivalence" of the symphony's conclusion to Vaughan Williams' lack of faith in God.<sup>20</sup>

Stylistic elements and the programmatic nature of *A Sea Symphony* are also linked to ideology. A proliferation of pieces about the sea at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g. Stanford's *Sea Songs*, Debussy's *La Mer*, and Elgar's *Sea Pictures*) indicates that many composers saw themselves as embarking on a musical adventure into a new era, as

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<sup>20</sup> Adams, 35.

if sailing into uncharted seas.<sup>21</sup> Stylistically, Vaughan Williams remains connected with his Classic-Romantic musical heritage in the first movement's ties to sonata structure, the placement of the slow movement, the presence of a *scherzo*, overall melodic lyricism, and grand conception of orchestral and choral textures.

Frederick Delius (1863-1935) shared a distinctly non-Christian mentality with Vaughan Williams and Whitman, but he was a pantheist rather than an agnostic.

Although he had many personal traits that differed from Whitman's, Delius

viewed his iconoclastic career—his rebellion against his businessman father, his revolutionary discovery and incorporation of black American harmonies, his rejection of Christianity and British nationalism—as a Whitmanian affirmation of the indomitable self.<sup>22</sup>

Further, he likened his own courageous battle with decades of physical disability to Whitman's long-term struggle with illness.<sup>23</sup> Delius received inspiration from themes of courage and reliance on self in Nietzsche too, whose *Also sprach Zarathustra* was the source for his *Mass of Life* (1905).<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the ultimate courage displayed by the bereaved he-bird in Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" was a catalyst for Delius' *Sea Drift*. "Out of the Cradle" from Whitman's *Sea-Drift* was also the source for Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony*. The primary theme of this sorrowful poem is a boy's experience of love and loss as he observes a bird mourning for his mate. Delius set only the central portion of the poem, the story of the pair of birds in love and the male's

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 126.

<sup>22</sup> Sullivan, 102.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Hutchings, *Delius* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1948), 65.

subsequent grief when he loses his mate. His omission of the ending, which describes the boy's transformation of loss into poetic inspiration, allows Delius to maintain a unified theme throughout the cantata. For Delius, this poem was clearly about loss and the fleeting nature of life. This theme of transience motivated the rest of his musical career.<sup>25</sup>

The musical elements in Delius' *Sea Drift* intensify the sensual aspects of Whitman's poetry. From the first notes of the orchestral introduction, it is clear that Delius' sea is not Vaughan Williams'. For Delius, the sea is a metaphor for life's transience, rather than voyages of the imagination.<sup>26</sup> Descending woodwinds and slow harmonic rhythm, paced by the bass instruments, evoke Whitman's nostalgic picture of the Paumanok seashore. The cantata's loosely-organized structure of seven sections allows for an unrestrained flow of emotion from beginning to end. Although Whitman used italics to separate the love songs of the birds from the narration, Delius does not use them as a structural guideline in assigning parts to the baritone soloist or chorus. At times he sets two stanzas simultaneously, with dramatic effect. In a particularly poignant moment, the baritone sings the hopeful words, "For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me, / so faint, I must be still to listen," over the hushed chorus that utters the she-bird's denial: "Do not be decoy'd elsewhere, / that is the whistle of the wind, it is not my voice, / that is the fluttering of the spray, / Those are the shadows of leaves." Delius uses chromaticism and daring harmony as expressive devices, at once highlighting the male bird's yearning, then intensifying the climax when he realizes she is gone

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<sup>25</sup> Sullivan, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 109.

forever. Harmonic instability and lack of forward motion create a sense of suspension from time and space, contributing to the mystic quality of the setting.<sup>27</sup> A thematic recapitulation produces maximum effect when the a cappella choir's "O rising stars" recalls the melodic theme of "Shine! Shine!" The complete contrast in dynamics, texture, and range highlights the disparity between the ecstatic mood of the earlier and the quiet desperation of the latter.<sup>28</sup>

#### Poetic Perspective: When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

Upon learning of President Lincoln's assassination on 14 April 1865, Walt Whitman, who had been present at Lincoln's second inauguration and was an ardent supporter, began working on an elegy in his honor. It was quickly completed and added to the 1865 publication *Sequel to Drum Taps*. The poem follows the progress of Lincoln's coffin across the country to its final resting place in Springfield, Illinois, but notably never names Lincoln or the tragic circumstances of his death. This lack of detail transforms the poet's grief into a universal, timeless grief. After the introduction of the passing coffin and the narrator's expression of mourning for the one it holds, the poet makes it clear that his intent is to reconcile himself with all of death:

(Nor for you, for one alone,  
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,  
For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O sane and  
sacred death.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Burn, notes for Frederick Delius, *Sea Drift; Songs of Farewell; Songs of Sunset*, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/Richard Hickox (Chandos Records Ltd. Compact disc CHAN 9219, 1993).

The journey toward knowledge of death is accompanied by three symbols—lilac, star, and thrush—that are threaded through the poem. Much of the scholarly attention given to the poem has focused on the three symbols and their development. The lilac, initially a token of grief the narrator places on the coffin, becomes a sign of nature and renewal as it is left to bloom in the dooryard. The setting western star reminds the narrator of the fallen President and with its final passing, the acceptance of his death. The thrush is the poet's voice, and in its singing the joyous death song brings the narrator knowledge that death is an end to suffering. In the epiphany brought about by the bird's song, the truth becomes clear: it is not the dead who suffer, but the living. This knowledge allows the narrator to say goodbye to his loved one, while keeping the symbols in his heart:

Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,  
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.

“Lilacs” has been the subject of several complete musical settings, and its famous “Death Carol” the source of many more. From a practical standpoint, the recurrent symbols, musical imagery in the thrush's song, narrative continuity, and Whitman's uncharacteristic grammatical simplicity seem to be the reason for its appeal.<sup>29</sup> But on an aesthetic level, “Lilacs” seems to have a strong emotional draw for composers. Moreover, it has repeatedly been a vehicle for the expression of collective grief in response to the death of national leaders.

Paul Hindemith's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd: A Requiem "For Those We Love"* (1946) was his response to the aftermath of World War II and the death

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<sup>29</sup> Mortimer H. Frank, “Music in American Literary History: A Survey of the Significance of Music in the Writings of Eight American Literary Figures” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1968), 57-8.

of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It is a complete setting of the 206-line poem for chorus, orchestra, soprano and baritone soloists. Long considered to be Hindemith's expression of love and gratitude to the United States for sheltering him during the German Nazi regime, and an indication of his horror over the Holocaust, "Lilacs" reflects more ambiguity than previously thought. Kim Kowalke points out that Hindemith's original subtitle, "An American Requiem"—an obvious allusion to Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem*—was an indication of Hindemith's "ambivalence about his own national identity at this crucial point in his career."<sup>30</sup> That he chose to set Whitman may have been a calculated attempt to seem "American," or evidence of a more personal ideological connection with the poet. "Lilacs" was not Hindemith's first Whitman setting. At age 23, long before his immigration, he composed the song cycle *Three Hymns of Walt Whitman* (unpublished), and close friend Luther Noss remarked that Hindemith used *Leaves of Grass* as an American "primer."<sup>31</sup> At any rate, his relationship with America seems to have been turbulent, ranging from enthusiasm about his success here, to bitterness that he had never been accepted:

I was fourteen years in America and did my best to collaborate in the development of American music. . . . Nobody ever bothered to call me an American musician, I always remained for them a foreigner, although I even wrote the piece that in due time . . . may well become one of the few musical treasures of the nation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kim Kowalke, "For Those We Love: Hindemith, Whitman, and 'An American Requiem,'" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50/1 (Spring 1997): 143.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Coleman-Hull, "A Visionary Backward Glance: The Divided Experience in Paul Hindemith's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd: A Requiem 'For Those We Love'*," in *Walt Whitman and Modern Music*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Hindemith to Oscar Cox, 14 December 1956; quoted in Skelton, *Hindemith: The Man Behind the Music*, 278, and cited in Coleman-Hull, 104.

The mixed critical reception Hindemith's "Lilacs" received may reflect puzzlement over how to describe the work. Despite the Germanic nature of Hindemith's style, exemplified by tight formal organization, neo-Baroque techniques of fugue, canon, and passacaglia, and atmosphere of thoughtful melancholy, it has been called his most "American" work. Lacking idiomatic American elements such as jazz or folk song, "Lilacs" contains one overt American reference—the quotation of "Taps." The Requiem's subtitle "For Those We Love" refers to an Episcopal hymn Hindemith likely encountered in the United States, "For Those We Love Within the Veil," a commemorative song used for memorial services during and after the war. Yet even this reference has hidden layers. The hymn's tune is based on the ancient Jewish tune *Gaza*, and quite possibly reflects Hindemith's desire to maintain ties with his homeland.<sup>33</sup> The fact that Hindemith chose to intersperse this tune with the meaningful poetic lines "And I knew Death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death" adds to its significance. But even the conflicting messages described above reveal Hindemith's ideological affinity for Whitman. Both men believed in the power of their art to transcend politics and nationality—to be truly "democratic." Hindemith's incorporation of diverse national and religious allusions likely does not reflect confusion, but rather a commitment to the democratic nature of music.

The work's predominantly unemotional approach reveals Hindemith's ideology concerning the composer's role, that the composer's personal feelings are secondary to the message being expressed on behalf of a larger culture.<sup>34</sup> His admiration for J. S.

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<sup>33</sup> Kowalke, 144, 155.

<sup>34</sup> Coleman-Hull, 97.



Bach's work ethic, which allowed production of music apart from emotional context, explains his denial that "Lilacs" was anything more personal than an attempt to assist in the healing process of the nation.<sup>35</sup> Hindemith demonstrates a respect for the poetry in that his thoughtful text underlay consistently allows the clarity of Whitman's voice to emerge. The Arioso #5 for soprano solo (Whitman's strophe 9), "Sing on there in the swamp," with its *pp* ostinato-like accompaniment of winds and muted strings, provides a delicate, melancholy background for the subtly-inflected vocal line, for example. He also uses structural elements to amplify the meaning and symbolism in the poem. For instance, the application of fugue technique to texts that portray America's diversity in #7 amplifies the poetic theme. The use of the chorus instead of soloist in the section "Come lovely and soothing death" symbolically transforms the narrator's individual grief into a collective experience.<sup>36</sup>

Composer Roger Sessions (1896-1985) also believed in democracy's connection to the arts. According to Sessions, art

must be conscious of its responsibilities, competent, close to the people, and combative in spirit . . . it must be rooted in the soil, and in the deepest human impulses that spring from man's contact with the soil and with other human beings.<sup>37</sup>

With such strong ideological ties to Whitman as this, it is not surprising that Sessions chose to set "Lilacs." The resultant work is considered by many to be his most significant.

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<sup>35</sup> Kowalke, 171.

<sup>36</sup> Coleman-Hull, 102-3.

<sup>37</sup> Roger Sessions, *Roger Sessions on Music: Collected Essays*, ed. Edward T. Cone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 274-5, cited in Rugoff, 146.

Although Sessions first encountered Whitman's poetry in the winter of 1910, making sketches for a setting of "Lilacs" that he abandoned, it was not until he received a commission from the University of California at Berkeley in 1964 that he committed to setting the poem. While at work on the second movement, Sessions received word that Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy had been shot. He recalled:

I wasn't thinking of anybody's assassination except Lincoln's when I started that second part, but then Martin Luther King was shot and Bobby Kennedy was shot. And his funeral train was passing through while I was writing that part ["here, coffin that slowly passes, I give you my sprig of Lilac."] and I was affected by it.<sup>38</sup>

Sessions organized the musical setting into three increasingly longer parts. The first part contains the presentation of the three symbols, the second follows the progress of the funeral train, and the third deals with Whitman's contemplation of death. Sessions edited the poem to what he considered a manageable length by omitting or condensing some parallelisms. Although he reportedly did not care for Hindemith's setting, there are some surface similarities between the two works. Sessions divided the sections of poetry between soloists and chorus the same way as Hindemith, except for "Come lovely and soothing death," which he assigned to the contralto rather than the chorus.<sup>39</sup>

Sessions' setting of "Lilacs" is more effortlessly "American" than Hindemith's. The most obvious evidence of this is the prosody. Sessions gives careful attention to the natural stresses of the English language through recitative-like rhythms, constantly changing irregular meter, and melodic contour. The score indicates that the singer should

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<sup>38</sup> Andrea Olmstead, *Roger Sessions and His Music* (Ann Arbor MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), 157.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

interpret the RHYTHMIC DETAIL in terms of the unforced inflections of the English language, which the composer has used as the basis of his vocal conception. He should, therefore, on no account force himself into a mechanical rendition of the exact note-values as written, but rather interpret them freely in terms of natural English diction, respecting the subtleties of rhythm and stress which are inherent in the words themselves.<sup>40</sup>

Sessions' individuality is demonstrated in his application of the twelve-tone technique. Typically, sections begin with identifiable rows but they quickly dissolve. For example, the first soprano solo at the beginning contains a full row, the second half of which is a transposed inversion of itself, but further manifestations are difficult to trace.<sup>41</sup> Sessions constantly downplayed the importance of twelve-tone technique in his music, and his resistance to being labeled a serial composer indicates his independent spirit. He exhibited the same independence when it came to writing music with idiomatic American styles, a practice he deemed unnecessary. When asked if there was an American quality to his work, Sessions replied,

I never worried about that. . . . I've had American tradition from the day I was born. Everything that we had was local, and if it were other than local, it was *national*. . . . What is really national, if you want to call it that, is the character that gradually develops in a national idiom. And I've never worried about being either nationalistic or individual, because I think I am. . . . If you're self-conscious about [these things], then the music becomes essentially contrived.<sup>42</sup>

On the whole, Sessions' "Lilacs" is much more descriptive than Hindemith's.

Relying less on structural elements and more on dramatic forward motion and

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<sup>40</sup> Roger Sessions, "Notes on Performance," *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, vocal score arranged by the composer (Bryn Mawr PA: Merion Music, Inc., 1974), iii. Capitalization is Sessions'.

<sup>41</sup> Olmstead, 160-1.

<sup>42</sup> Andrea Olmstead, *Conversations with Roger Sessions* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 216.

madrigalian word-painting, “the notion of language as sound and feeling as opposed to language as semantics and intellect comes to the fore.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the greatest energy in Sessions’ work is in his treatment of Whitman’s catalogues of American life as the funeral procession passes through the countryside (e.g. “Pictures of growing spring, and farms, and homes . . .”). Dense polyphony, antiphonal choral texture, dissonance, rhythmic drive, and tempo changes vividly portray the vibrancy of the young nation Whitman envisioned, made all the more convincing by Sessions’ own New England background.

#### Ideological Perspective: “Americanness”

Walt Whitman is the undisputed poet of choice for composers who wish to celebrate “Americanness.” The definition of Americanness differs based upon the perspective of the composer and his or her historical context. According to Thomas Clarke Owens, the “discourse on Americanness” may include but is not limited to the following categories:

nature: wilderness, vastness, frontier  
purity: simplicity, novelty, youth, idealism, truth, naiveté  
strength: virility, manliness, persistence, determination, devotion, loyalty  
political/historical: democracy, individualism, independence, patriotism,  
pioneering

Owens cites Whitman as a major contributor to the discourse, observing that the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* reads like a catalogue of these values.<sup>44</sup> Composer Charles Ives is an example of one who “sculpted his public persona to embody American

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<sup>43</sup> Rugoff, 136.

<sup>44</sup>Thomas Clarke Owens, “Charles Ives and His American Context: Images of ‘Americanness’ in the Arts” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999), 19, 22-23.

stereotypes,” and he benefited from the critical perception of his music as uniquely American, or “vigorous, pioneering, idealistic, pure, rooted in the Connecticut soil.”<sup>45</sup> Although Ives produced only one Whitman setting, a song entitled “Walt Whitman” (1921), his work is representative of the quest to create thoroughly American music, using Whitman for inspiration.

American composers were slower to discover Whitman than British composers, however. Although Whitman frequently proclaimed the need for music that would be uniquely American, native composers were reluctant to break free from European stylistic trends. Hence, the American settings that predated those of Delius and Vaughan Williams were on a very small scale. The first known American setting is from 1880: a narration with piano accompaniment by Frederick Louis Ritter, “Dirge for Two Veterans.” The second setting, “O Captain, My Captain!” by C. M. Wyman, was printed in a public school song book for male chorus.<sup>46</sup> It was the generation of American composers coming into prominence in the 1930s that first fully embraced Whitman. Among them are Roy Harris, William Schuman, Norman Lockwood, Howard Hanson, and Ernst Bacon.<sup>47</sup> Although Aaron Copland never composed to a Whitman text, he acknowledged the poet as a spiritual leader for the new generation of composers:

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>46</sup> John Samuel Wannamaker, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Study of Theme, Structure, and Prosody” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 27-29.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 38.

Our concern was not with the quotable hymn or spiritual: we wanted to find a music that would speak of universal things in a vernacular or American speech rhythms. We wanted to write music on a level that left popular music far behind—music with a largeness of utterance wholly representative of the country that Whitman had envisaged.<sup>48</sup>

Roy Harris (1898-1979), the “Oklahoma composer who was born in a log cabin on Lincoln’s birthday,”<sup>49</sup> was a key figure in American music and a prolific champion of Walt Whitman’s verse. His rugged upbringing and earthy character embodied Whitman’s image of the American man, and his music met Whitman’s challenge for American composers to create an individual art. Harris composed twelve Whitman settings, beginning with “A Song for Occupations” (1935), and including *Symphony for Voices* (1939) and *Songs of Democracy* (1941). His choice of poetry reflects an idealistic vision of America, guided by the principles of Whitman’s spiritual democracy.

*Symphony for Voices*, for unaccompanied eight-part chorus, includes “Song for All Ships,” “Tears,” and “Inscription.” Both the text selected for “Inscriptions” and Harris’ compositional technique reveal a connection with Whitman’s ideology:

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,  
Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine,  
The Modern Man I sing.<sup>50</sup>

For Whitman, “Modern Man” was enterprising, fully engaged in life, free, law-abiding, and living in a state of respect for the universal community. Harris uses a structural device to convey the “passion, pulse, and power” of Modern Man: a triple fugue in eight

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<sup>48</sup> Aaron Copland, *Music and Imagination* (New York: New American Library, 1959), 111, cited in Wannamaker, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Refers to the title of an article by Nicolas Slonimsky in *A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock*, ed. Richard Crawford, R. Allen Lott, and Carol J. Oja (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

<sup>50</sup> *WPP*, 165.

voices. The counterpoint simultaneously symbolizes freedom and law. As one of the most difficult choral fugues of the twentieth century, “Inscriptions” also betrays Harris’ tendency toward grandiosity. The other two pieces in *Symphony for Voices*, “Song for All Ships” and “Tears”, are notable for the use of choral ostinatos, over which a solo voice or section delivers text in quasi-recitative style. The robust unison opening of “Song” (“Today a rude brief recitative”) in C-major precedes the 9/8 ostinato section, in which shifting accents, hemiolas and polytonality effectively paint a picture of tossing ships.

It is not surprising that at the outset of World War II, Harris set three poems with obvious democratic themes in *Songs of Democracy* (1941). In “To Thee, Old Cause” Harris uses only Whitman’s first stanza:

To thee old cause!  
Thou peerless, passionate, good cause,  
Thou stern, remorseless, sweet idea,  
Deathless throughout the ages, races, lands,  
After a strange sad war, great war for thee,  
(I think all war through time was really fought, and ever will be really  
fought, for thee,)  
These chants for thee, the eternal march of thee.<sup>51</sup>

The second poem, “Year That Trembled” from *Drum-Taps*, questions the outcome of the war (“must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled / And sullen hymns of defeat?”). For the third text, Harris selected these four lines from “The Commonplace”:

The open air I sing, freedom, toleration,  
The common day and night—the common earth and waters,  
Your farm—your work, trade, occupation,  
The democratic wisdom underneath, like solid ground for all.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *WPP*, 167.

<sup>52</sup> *WPP*, 651.

That the poem must have reminded Harris of his Oklahoma roots seems obvious, but more importantly it expressed his belief in an idealistic democracy. Harris uses musical analogues for many of the ideas expressed in the poem. The text receives three full statements, as if to emphasize its importance. In the first, the opening octaves and frequent melodic and harmonic open fourths and fifths represent the “open air” as well as democratic unity. The polyphonic second section symbolizes the celebration of individual freedom in a democratic society. Voices in harmony make a homophonic statement in the final section, indicating reconciliation of the dual prongs of democracy: community and individuality. Harris’ use of a simple tonal device—the modification of the B-natural on “freedom” to a B-flat on “toleration”—symbolizes Whitman’s concept of individuality in dynamic tension with the rights of others.

Though born a generation later than Roy Harris, Norman Dello Joio (b. 1913) also set Whitman to music in response to World War II. “Vigil Strange” (1941) for mixed chorus and piano (four hands), “The Mystic Trumpeter” (1943) for mixed chorus and French horn, and “A Jubilant Song” (1946) for mixed or women’s chorus and piano, constitute a chronicle of Dello Joio’s personal reaction to the war:

“Vigil Strange,” a profound expression of grief, was composed during the early years of World War II when the Allied forces were suffering one setback after another. “The Mystic Trumpeter,” which contrasts the hopes and dreams of lovers with the ravages of war, but in the end offers hope for the future, was written at a time when the tide of battle was turning in favor of the Allies. “A Jubilant Song” is an unrestrained expression of joy following the successful conclusion of the war.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas A. Bumgardner, *Norman Dello Joio* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 30-31.



Like Harris, Dello Joio was drawn to Whitman's theme of spiritual democracy. He shared the Whitman ideal of music as the "great combiner," frequently writing pieces that would unite large masses of musicians. Dello Joio absorbed his teacher Hindemith's craftsman-like approach and discipline, and took the idea of "functional music" as an imperative to write highly accessible music. His feeling for the communal nature of music probably compelled him to compose his Whitman settings for chorus.<sup>54</sup>

Despite his avowed connection to Whitman, Dello Joio has felt no compunction in rewriting his poems. Not only does he omit large sections of poetry and string together widely separated lines and phrases, he also paraphrases Whitman, with considerable loss to the artistic integrity of the original. Compare this passage from Whitman's "Proud Music of the Storm":

Give me to hold all sounds, (I madly struggling cry,  
Fill me with all the voices of the universe,  
Endow me with their throbbings, nature's also,  
The tempests, waters, winds, operas and chants, marches and dances,  
Utter, pour in, for I would take them all!<sup>55</sup>

with Dello Joio's version:

I struggling cry to hold all sounds  
O to be filled with the voices of the universe,  
Nature, endow us with your throbbings,  
The tempests, the waters, the winds,  
God's chants and psalms, O! the marches, the dances,  
Utter! Pour in! I would take them all.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 16, 28.

<sup>55</sup> *WPP*, 530.

Wannamaker suggests that Dello Joio tailors the texts to fit a prescribed number of accents per line.<sup>56</sup> There is little doubt that some of the poetry's beauty is lost, but Dello Joio captures the larger implications of Whitman's themes. For example, in trimming Whitman's "A Song of Joys" from 161 lines down to eleven for "A Jubilant Song" by omitting the catalogs, lists, and intimate passages, Dello Joio effectively distills the poem into a summation of Whitman's celebration of life.<sup>57</sup> In a sense, even this broad-brushing of Whitman to suit his own purposes shows Dello Joio's American character.

Dello Joio's four *Songs of Walt Whitman* (1966) display his ability to capture a mood through word-painting and colorful orchestration. The poem "I Sit and Look Out" is characteristically adapted for the first song. By omitting or changing references to specific persons, Dello Joio paradoxically includes everyone. For example,

I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves,  
remorseful after deeds done,  
I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected,  
gaunt, desperate,  
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous seducer of  
young women,  
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love attempted to be hid, I  
see these signs on the earth,

is changed to

Oh! hear the secret sobs of those at anguish with themselves.  
Oh! see mankind misused, and mark the ranklings of hate,  
and mark all oppression and shame and unrequited love.

Dello Joio is apparently democratizing the poem through text revisions that result in an all-inclusive message. He compensates for reducing the poetry's intimacy by setting the

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<sup>56</sup> Wannamaker, 273.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 269.

first few lines for baritone solo. The extended, ethereal orchestral introduction creates a feeling of suspension from time. A similar device is present in the third song of the set, “Tears,” in which a lengthy chromatic orchestral introduction sets a mood of haunting grief. Dello Joio’s characteristic use of the tritone throughout the setting contributes to the mysterious atmosphere. “The Dalliance of Eagles” is a dazzling display of musical athleticism suitable for Whitman’s original description of eagles mating in mid-air. Dello Joio employs polytonal effects, syncopations, jazz chords, and extreme melodic and dynamic ranges to capture the physicality of the verse. In completely rewriting the poem to suit his musical purposes, he omits the one clear reference to mating (“The rushing amorous contact high in space together”). “Take Our Hand, Walt Whitman,” inspired by “Salut au Monde!” is Dello Joio’s tribute to the poet who called for a spiritual democracy. The unrestrained energy and joyous extroversion of the setting reveal the composer’s belief in the possibility of Whitman’s idealistic democracy.

Additional Evaluative Tools: Originality, Prosody,  
and Marriage of Word and Music

One of the problems involved in evaluating Whitman settings is the extreme diversity of musical styles represented in them. Although Whitman musical settings are essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon, it is still too soon to view that century’s musical trends objectively. The issue is further obscured by ongoing tensions in the critical world. With an airtight canon of classical repertoire established by the early twentieth century, it seems the main goal of criticism is to decide whether new works are

worthy of being admitted to the canon.<sup>58</sup> Setting aside the fact that any critic is influenced by his or her own experience, and the truth that it is impossible to evaluate where a piece of music will stand in history without the advantage of hindsight—both factors that are unchangeable—the modern critic can still choose the way in which he views music history. If one regards music history as a chronological narrative of “progress,” then any piece of music that is not innovative is deemed unimportant. Journalistic critics tend to label a new piece according to historic precedent, and analysts “issue a certificate of workmanship.” Both approaches “work to bestow significance upon the new composition,” treating it merely as an entry in the flow of history.<sup>59</sup> But as Leo Treitler points out, these approaches are riddled with problems. Musicologist Joseph Kerman joins Treitler’s protest against an evolutionary view of music history, calling for criticism that searches for individuality in a piece of music and discovers the “aesthetic quality of the music itself.”<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps originality is a more valid standard than innovation. Innovation occurs when a composer seeks to invent new “rules,” as was the case in Schoenberg’s development of the twelve-tone system, or in Cage’s aleatory music. Music history that only follows the threads of innovation omits less innovative composers or labels them “dead ends.”<sup>61</sup> Originality is a much more inclusive term. Originality involves finding

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<sup>58</sup> *NGD*, s.v. “Criticism.”

<sup>59</sup> Leo Treitler, “The Present as History,” *Perspectives of New Music* 7 (1969), 5-6.

<sup>60</sup> Kerman, 121-25.

<sup>61</sup> Treitler, 38, referring to Richard Crocker’s treatment of Bartók in *A History of Musical Style* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966).

new ways (“strategies”) to work within the rules—for example, J. S. Bach’s exploration of fugue.<sup>62</sup> A critical method that recognizes the value of originality will more objectively discern the “aesthetic quality of the music itself.” A signpost of originality in Whitman settings is that Whitman’s words will sound fresh, individual, and unique, regardless of the composer’s stylistic technique.

Another evaluative approach to Whitman settings concerns the relationship of poetry and music. A common metaphor that describes the ideal relationship between text and music is “marriage,” meaning that two separate entities join together in equal partnership. Donald Ivey describes texted music as an amalgamation of the two elements, to the point that they cannot be distinguished as separate: “To draw an analogy: in the eating of a nectarine, at what point is one aware of the peach and at what point of the plum? So it is with song.”<sup>63</sup> Since poetry and music may still be discussed separately, Ivey suggests a critical approach that divides the analysis into “mechanical correspondences,” for example meter and prosody, and “expression,” or insight into the imagery in the text and music.<sup>64</sup>

Ideologies about musico-poetic relations have changed throughout history. In Medieval times, ancient poetic feet evolved into the musical rhythmic modes, which were based on triple divisions. Natural text syllabification and poetic integrity were secondary to mathematical approaches to musical rhythms, which were thought to elevate the mind

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<sup>62</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 31. Meyer uses the terms “originality” and “innovation” interchangeably but distinguishes between inventing new rules and finding new strategies within the rules.

<sup>63</sup> Donald Ivey, *Song: Anatomy, Imagery, and Styles* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), vii.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

and be pleasing to God.<sup>65</sup> Renaissance philosophy valued rhetorical literature intended to persuade the reader. This philosophy held true for Renaissance vocal music, which also attempted to persuade, albeit through new expressive devices such as harmony and dissonance. Issues in Baroque and Classical music revolved around the question of music as imitation or representation of poetry. Word-painting, the utilization of musical devices to imitate the meaning of the word, and the codification of musical techniques into a doctrine of affects representing human emotion, were common approaches that became the topic of heated debate as the eighteenth century progressed. The contrast between Monteverdi's mandate that the text should be the master of the music, and Mozart's assertion that poetry should be the obedient daughter of the music, illustrates the shift in priorities over a two-hundred-year span. This shift prefigured the Romantic emphasis on music as expression of emotion:

Once poets and composers . . . began, like actors, to draw on their own real emotions as a way of imagining and expressing the emotions appropriate to a persona, the way lay open for the eventual Romantic redefinition of poets and composers not merely as people with unusual skill and training, but as people with unusual sensibility, whose feeling, somehow bodied forth in verse or melody were considered a primary locus of value.<sup>66</sup>

This statement reveals a "history as progress" bias with the implied judgement that music before the Romantic period was not emotional and therefore wanting. But it also reflects nineteenth-century Romantic ideology. The debate over the imitative nature of music resurfaced with the rise of instrumental program music, which appealed to the listener's

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<sup>65</sup> The following summary is condensed from James Anderson Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>66</sup> Winn, 237.

imagination by way of suggestive titles. Franz Liszt argued that his program pieces represented a truer union of poetry and music, whereas vocal music merely combined the two. Wagner's theory of union within the arts, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, was to be accomplished through emotion—a direct conflict with Hanslick's 1854 *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (“The Beautiful in Music”), which divorced music from both words and feelings.

The tension exemplified by the viewpoints of Wagner and Hanslick has continued to the present. Joseph Coroniti reframes the question in this way: is the musical setting a “reading” of the poem or an “appropriation”?<sup>67</sup> Ned Rorem's conception represents an approach comparable to Coroniti's “appropriation”:

Song is the reincarnation of a poem which was destroyed in order to live again in music. The composer, no matter how respectful, must treat poetry as a skeleton on which to bestow flesh, breaking a few bones in the process. He does not render a poem more *musical* (poetry isn't music, it's poetry); he weds it to sound, creating a third entity of different and sometimes greater magnitude than either parent.<sup>68</sup>

Whether a “reading” is even possible is debatable. Music by nature adds elements to the poem, depending upon the composer's individual response. Although, as Coroniti writes, “there is, fortunately, no catalog of matching musical and poetic elements, no composing by numbers,”<sup>69</sup> music and poetry share some elements because both occur in time.

Analogies may be drawn in form, rhythm, tempo, even melody and harmony, but to codify the analogies and represent them as evidence of music being a “reading” of poetry

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph Coroniti, *Poetry as Text in Twentieth-Century Vocal Music: From Stravinsky to Reich* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>68</sup> Ned Rorem, *Critical Affairs: A Composer's Journal* (New York: Braziller, 1970), 26, cited in Coroniti, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Coroniti, 5.

breaks up upon closer examination—hence Rorem’s “poetry isn’t music; it’s poetry.” This is not to say that certain musical techniques do not add significantly to the sensitive reading of a text. The study of prosody, or patterns of syllabic accentuation, has deeper implications than whether the music renders the poetic syllables in a natural manner. Prosody can illuminate the deeper meaning of the text, particularly when applied to the free structure of Whitman’s verse.<sup>70</sup> For example, Harris’ choice of 9/8 meter for the text “today a rude brief recitative” (“Song for All Seas, All Ships”) enables a natural reproduction of poetic spondee. The simple, arpeggiated unison melody further characterizes the meaning of both “rude” and “brief.” Whether this adept gesture reflects the composer’s education in prosody or a spontaneous reaction to the poetry itself is a moot point, for the result is that Whitman’s ideas are presented in an individual, ingratiating manner. Many composers cannot explain a logical method by which they set poetry to music. Arnold Schoenberg presumably summarizes for many:

I had composed many of my songs right through to the end, intoxicated by the sound of the opening words and without concern for the subsequent course of the poetic action—indeed without grasping this at all in the exuberance of composing—and only some days later came to examine the text to find out what the poetic content of the song really was. I then discovered to my great astonishment that I have never done greater justice to the poet than when, led on by the first direct contact with the opening sound, I had foreseen everything that obviously with necessity had to follow this initial sound.<sup>71</sup>

Wherever the modern composer’s setting of Whitman text falls on the continuum from “reading” to “appropriation,” the task of critical analysis includes the question of

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 7. For a thorough examination of the prosody in Whitman musical settings through 1970, see Wannamaker.

<sup>71</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. I (Mainz: B. Schott’s Söhne, 1966), cited in Coroniti, 6.



originality, evidenced by the composer's empathetic ideological understanding of Whitman. Ideally, Whitman—or some aspect of him—finds a new incarnation in the composer's hands.

CHAPTER 3  
CRITICAL EVALUATION OF *SYMPHONY NO. 2*  
BY LOWELL LIEBERMANN

Biography

Lowell Liebermann was only thirteen when he decided he wanted to be a composer. Born 22 February 1961 in New York City, Liebermann began piano lessons when he was eight, and remembers trying to compose little piano pieces before he could read music.<sup>1</sup> Seeing the depth of their son's interest in music, Liebermann's parents enrolled him in the studio of Ada (Sohn) Segal, a former concert pianist. After his family moved to Westchester when he was fourteen, Liebermann began studying composition there with Ruth Schonthal, who at one time had studied with Hindemith. It was while studying with Schonthal that he wrote his opus 1, *Piano Sonata No. 1*, for which he won first place in the Music Teachers National Association competition in 1977. Liebermann graduated from high school a year early and spent one year at SUNY-Stony Brook, studying composition with David Diamond. The next year he followed Diamond to Juilliard. Liebermann received his Bachelor's degree in Music from Juilliard in 1983,

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<sup>1</sup> Biographical information has been compiled from Lisa Michelle Garner, "Lowell Liebermann: A Stylistic Analysis and Discussion of the Sonata for Flute and Piano, op. 23, Sonata for Flute and Guitar, op. 25, and 'Soliloquy' for flute solo, op. 44" (D.M.A. diss., Rice University, 1997); Jeannine Marie Dennis, "The Life and Music of Lowell Liebermann with an Emphasis on His Music for the Flute and the Piccolo" (D.M.A. diss., University of Cincinnati, 1999); Lisa R. McArthur, "Lowell Liebermann: His Compositional Style as Derived from Three Flute Works and Applied to Other Selected Instrumental Works" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kentucky, 1999); and Dean Alan Nichols, "A Survey of the Solo Piano Works of Lowell Liebermann" (D.M.A. diss., University of Kentucky, 2000). All four dissertations contain information gained from personal interviews with Liebermann.

Master of Music in 1985, and Doctor of Musical Arts in 1987. In addition to his work with Diamond, he studied piano with Jacob Lateiner and conducting with László Halász. Upon beginning his doctoral work, Liebermann left Diamond to study with Vincent Persichetti (1915-1987), to whom he dedicated his *Final Songs* (op. 21) in 1987.

Liebermann was successful enough by the time he left Juilliard that he has been able to work entirely on commission ever since. Two of his earliest commissions, from an organist at Juilliard, were completed in 1985: *Missa Brevis* (op. 15) for SATB choir, soloists, and organ, and *De Profundis* (op. 16) for organ, which was the first piece to be published by Theodore Presser. He has steadily accumulated an impressive list of honors and awards, including the Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Grand Prize in the 1986 Delius International Composition Contest for his *War Songs* (op. 6, 1980), and more recently, the American Composers' Invitational Award at the 11th Van Cliburn competition in 2001, for his *Three Impromptus* (op. 68).

Liebermann is prolific in a wide variety of genres, including works for orchestra, chamber ensemble, piano, various solo instruments, voice, and chorus. His opera, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (op. 45, 1995), was the first opera by an American composer to be commissioned and performed at L'Opéra de Monte-Carlo. His piano and flute works have garnered a devoted following, thanks in part to their enthusiastic promotion by Stephen Hough and James Galway. Hough premiered *Piano Concerto No. 2* (op. 36) in 1992 with the National Symphony under Mstislav Rostropovich, and his recording of the First and Second Piano Concertos (BBC Scottish Orchestra, Liebermann conducting) received a Grammy nomination in 1998. Galway has been equally instrumental in

promoting Liebermann's music. The artist commissioned, recorded and regularly performs both the *Concerto for Flute and Orchestra* (op. 39, 1992) and the *Concerto for Flute, Harp and Orchestra* (op. 48, 1995). Liebermann's website lists more than two dozen recordings of his music that are currently available, including ten of the *Sonata for Flute and Piano* (op. 23, 1987) alone.

Lowell Liebermann has been identified with a late twentieth-century trend called "new tonalism." His music is characterized by expansive melodies, identifiable tonal centers, and carefully crafted structures. Beyond these generalities it is difficult to label, a fact that seems to frustrate critics. Liebermann makes no apologies for his music's indebtedness to the past, and freely acknowledges his ties to Western Classic-Romantic tradition. The 2001 *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* notes his music's commercial viability, popularity with prominent artists such as Hough and Galway, and "stylistic resourcefulness and polished craftsmanship. It resists identification with any particular school of composition."<sup>2</sup> Critics have compared Liebermann's style to Prokofiev, Mahler, Rachmaninov, Barber, Strauss, Britten, and even John Williams, but according to Liebermann, his influences are Shostakovich, Liszt, Busoni, Bartók, Mozart, Schubert, and Bach.

#### *Symphony No. 2, opus 67*

Liebermann was appointed composer-in-residence for the Dallas Symphony Orchestra in 1998. His agreement with the organization included the commission of one major piece per year, through the 2001-02 season. Prior to the appointment, the Dallas

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<sup>2</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, s.v. "Lowell Liebermann."

orchestra was part of a consortium that commissioned the *Concerto for Flute and Harp* (op. 48) in 1995. In June 1998 the DSO performed the Second Piano Concerto with soloist Stephen Hough. Following that performance, DSO president Eugene Bonelli contacted Liebermann about a residency, and simultaneously commissioned a large work for the orchestra's upcoming centennial celebration.<sup>3</sup> *Symphony No. 2* was officially commissioned by Ford Lacy and Cece Smith. It was completed in 1999 and premiered 10 February 2000 by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with DSO Music Director Andrew Litton conducting.

The symphony is scored for piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (4 players), harp, piano, celesta, organ, strings, SATB chorus, and optional brass band of 3 trumpets and 3 trombones. The score and parts for *Symphony No. 2* are available for rental through Theodore Presser Company, and Liebermann's piano-vocal reduction is currently in preparation for publication by Presser. A recording of the symphony's world premiere by the DSO is available from Delos.<sup>4</sup> Although the symphony is presented in one unbroken forty-minute span, it consists of four distinct sections, hereafter designated as "movements" for clarity in discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author, 14 August 2002, New York City, audio cassette recording.

<sup>4</sup> Lowell Liebermann, *World Premiere Recording Symphony No. 2; Concerto for Flute and Orchestra*, Eugenia Zukerman/Dallas Symphony Orchestra and Chorus/Andrew Litton (Delos International Compact disc DE 3256, 2000).

## Musical Realization of Whitman Texts in *Symphony No. 2*

### Poetry Sources

Liebermann compiled the texts for *Symphony No. 2* from various Whitman poems, including “Passage to India,” “Song of Myself,” “Poets to come!” (*Inscriptions*), “Song of the Universal” (*Birds of Passage*), “Proud Music of the Storm,” and “The Mystic Trumpeter” (*From Noon to Starry Night*). The complete text, variants, and source references are included in the Appendix.

According to Liebermann, the choice of texts was difficult. Desiring something distinctly American and celebratory for the occasion, he “scoured through practically the entirety of American literature” before settling on Whitman.<sup>5</sup> The poetic excerpts he selected are seemingly unrelated, and Liebermann admits, taken out of context. “Passage to India,” which first appeared in 1871, celebrated the completion of the Suez Canal, the transcontinental railroad, and the Atlantic cable during the years 1866-1869. For Whitman, these scientific and industrial achievements signified the world’s readiness for spiritual unification, in which time and space are transcended, and the soul’s path to God is clear.<sup>6</sup> “O vast Rondure, swimming in space” describes the Earth circling the universe, and as the poet contemplates its power and beauty, his thoughts turn toward his vision. He describes how all people since Adam and Eve had been “wandering, yearning, . . . with never-happy hearts,” but he, “the poet worthy that name” would come to link past

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<sup>5</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

<sup>6</sup> *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Passage to India” (1871). This valuable resource contains a separate entry and brief bibliography for every poem Whitman published. Exegesis of each of Liebermann’s selected texts was performed in consultation with this encyclopedia.

and future, Nature and Man together. The journey of the soul is the “passage to India.”

Liebermann selects this stanza from section 5:

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,  
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,  
Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,  
Unspeakable high processions of sun and moon and countless stars above,  
Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,  
With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention,  
Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee.

The Second Symphony contains two excerpts from “Song of Myself.” One of the dominant themes in the poem is the equality of body and soul in the quest for self-knowledge, love, and union with God. Whitman describes this discovery as a highly erotic poetic epiphany:

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,  
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the  
best,  
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,  
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon  
me,  
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my  
bare-stript heart,  
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

The “valvèd voice” is the poet’s soul, which reaches his heart through a sexual act, giving him intuitive knowledge of life. Literal interpretation of this passage becomes impossible as the sexual imagery’s logic breaks down. The poet’s vision turns mystical in the following passage:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jerome Loving, “Walt Whitman,” in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Eric L. Haralson (Chicago; London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 472.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all  
the argument of the earth,  
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,  
And I know that all men ever born are also my brothers, and the women  
my sisters and lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is love.  
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,  
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,  
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder, mullein and  
poke-weed.

Gay Wilson Allen describes the peace in this passage as a kind of religious ecstasy, characterized by a “sense of brotherhood, an acute appreciation of the beauty and equality of everything that exists, and a conviction that love animates all creation.”<sup>8</sup> “Kelson” (alt. “keelson”) is a support structure for a ship’s keel. Whitman’s usage of the word reflects his fondness for sea imagery, his practice of borrowing terms from specialized fields, and most of all his belief in the power of love to support and guide the universe. Liebermann took his excerpt for *Symphony No. 2* from Whitman’s moment of spiritual epiphany, beginning with “Swiftly arose,” and omitting the initial graphic sexual encounter and the curious list of plants and creatures at the conclusion.

The other “Song of Myself” excerpt Liebermann includes is from section 21, which celebrates the reality of the poet’s physical being. In sections 19 and 20, Whitman’s “intricate purpose” is to reveal his “hankering, gross, mystical, nude” body as sacred. Section 21 declares a union of body and soul:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,  
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new  
tongue.

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<sup>8</sup> Gay Wilson Allen, *A Reader’s Guide to Walt Whitman* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 128.



After proclaiming universal equality (“And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man”), Whitman describes an amorous encounter between night and earth:

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,  
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom’d night—press close magnetic nourishing night!  
Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!  
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Smile, O voluptuous cool-breath’d earth!  
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!  
Earth of the departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!  
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!  
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!  
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!  
Far-swooping elbow’d earth—rich apple-blossom’d earth!  
Smile, for your lover comes.

The poet who sees lovemaking qualities in night and earth believes he is a “prodigal,” an interpreter of love:

Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!  
O unspeakable passionate love.

The passages above—with the omission of the lines “Earth of shine . . .” and “Earth of the limpid . . .”—complete the first movement of *Symphony No. 2*.

The symphony’s second movement culminates with one of Whitman’s most quoted verses, an exhortation to future artists to further his mission:

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before  
known,  
Arouse! for you must justify me.

“Poets to Come” was first included in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* as part of “Chants Democratic,” and eventually moved to the 1871 edition’s first cluster, “Inscriptions.” As

Whitman proclaims his prophetic role, he acknowledges dependence on future poets to take up his cause: “Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you.” Liebermann sets only the first four lines of nine, using this stanza to conclude the march.

The concluding texts in the fourth movement of *Symphony No. 2* are taken from “Song of the Universal,” “Proud Music of the Storm,” and “The Mystic Trumpeter.”

“Song of the Universal” contributes these lines:

Give me O God to sing that thought,  
Give me, give him or her I love this quenchless faith,  
In Thy ensemble, whatever else withheld withhold not from us,  
Belief in plan of Thee enclosed in Time and Space,  
Health, peace, salvation universal.

Whitman wrote the poem in 1874 for a commencement address at Tufts College. Perhaps the occasion accounts for the poem’s utopian vision of America’s march toward perfection, as the poet prays for “health, peace, salvation universal.”

“Proud Music of the Storm,” first included in the 1871 *Leaves of Grass*, describes music as spiritual inspiration for poetic vision. For Whitman, music emanates from nature and ultimately points to God. As he falls into a dreamlike state, the poet is struck by a myriad of musical images, from “minnesingers singing their lays of love” to his “mother’s voice in lullaby or hymn” to the “annual singing of the children in St. Paul’s cathedral.” As the images wash over him, he invites them to fill his soul:

Give me to hold all sounds, (I madly struggling cry,)  
Fill me with all the voices of the universe,  
Endow me with their throbbings, Nature’s also,  
The tempests, waters, winds, operas and chants, marches and dances,  
Utter, pour in, for I would take them all!

Upon waking from the dream, the poet realizes that it is music that will inspire “Poems bridging the way from Life to Death.” Liebermann set the above stanza, omitting the parenthetical phrase.

The concluding texts in *Symphony No. 2* are from “The Mystic Trumpeter,” written in 1872. Stanzas four to eight describe an autobiographical journey from idealistic young love, to experience of war, to personal despair and final optimism. An optimistic tone pervades the poem, even as the trumpeter receives this entreaty from the poet:

Sing to my soul, renew its languishing faith and hope,  
Rouse up my slow belief, give me some vision of the future,  
Give me for once its prophecy and joy.

The poet sees joy in every facet of life: “a perfect world, all joy! . . . War, sorrow, suffering gone—the rank earth purged—nothing but joy left!” Liebermann captures Whitman’s ecstatic tone by extracting these lines from the last stanza:

O glad, exulting, culminating song!  
A vigor more than earth’s is in thy notes,  
.....  
Joy! joy! in freedom, worship, love! joy in the ecstasy of life!  
.....  
Joy! joy! all over joy!

### Musico-Poetic Relations

A study of the Second Symphony reveals poetic imagery as the primary stimulus for the composer’s artistic imagination. Liebermann conveys poetic ideas through instrumentation, harmony, texture, tempo, rhythm, and word-painting. His text setting demonstrates awareness of Whitman’s prosody and thoughtful approach to poetic parallelisms.

The orchestra frequently plays the leading role as Liebermann creates a sonic atmosphere for the text. Like the beginning of Vaughan Williams' *A Sea Symphony*, which evoked images of ships tossing on the ocean's billowing waves, Liebermann's orchestral opening depicts the "vast rondure" of space as infinite, mysterious, and unfathomable. Musical tools that facilitate the description include major/minor ambiguity, gradual evolution of the melodic line over the first forty-two measures, unusual ostinato instrumentation, and the initial *pianissimo* indication. The chorus entrance (m. 42) sets the orchestral themes of the introduction to Whitman's words, magnifying the imagery's effect. These musical analogies for space contrast with those for earth in the choral setting of "infinite power and beauty" (mm. 53-54). In this passage, descending pitches produce a sinking sensation, figuratively pulling the listener "down to earth" to contemplate this "rondure" that spins in space. The repeat in mm. 67-68 has a similar effect, intensified by louder dynamics and higher pitch.

Contrast between space and earth imagery is also evident in mm. 130-146 and mm. 155-165. In the former, the chorus's static harmonic rhythm ("Below, the manifold grass and waters . . .") seems to suggest earthly objects as opposed to formless outer space. By comparison, return to tonal ambiguity in mm. 155-165 provides perfect atmosphere for the poem's "inscrutable purpose" and "hidden prophetic intention," and unison choral texture heightens the verse's dramatic effect. At mm. 166-174 the percussion ensemble and ascending celeste conjure an image of twinkling stars, reinforcing the atmospheric quality of the poetic excerpt.

Liebermann also conveys poetic mood through tempo changes. The setting of Whitman’s passionate encounter between night and earth is driven by a structural *accelerando* from m. 192 to m. 209:

Table 1: Tempo changes, mm. 192-209

m. 192	<i>poco più mosso</i>	quarter-note = 66	“I am he that walks”
m. 201	<i>movendo</i>	quarter-note = 80	“I call to the earth”
m. 205	<i>stringendo</i>	quarter-note = 90	“Press close bare bosom’d night”
m. 209	<i>Allegro</i>	quarter-note = 100	“Night of south winds”

The sensuous theme is suggested by the horn’s two-octave melodic leap in m. 192 and imitative entries that follow; by the darker color brought to “night” by the Eb in m. 207; and by stretto orchestral descending scales in mm. 209-220. These elements, along with the A pedal in mm. 209-222 and prolonged V7 in mm. 221-222 constitute a musical metaphor for the sexual climax implied in the poetry.

Texture, tonality, and dynamics are vehicles for Liebermann’s interpretation of Whitman in the first movement’s finale, mm. 294-329. He evidently reads Whitman’s declaration of himself as “prodigal” as grandiose boasting, as the tonal uncertainty of the symphony’s opening is transformed into a solid Eb major, and the choir’s declaration becomes triadic, homophonic, and *fortissimo*.

The character of the second movement march and treatment of the verse at its conclusion offers one hermeneutic window into understanding Liebermann’s work. According to Liebermann, Whitman’s “Poets to come!” has a jingoistic quality that inspired the march.<sup>9</sup> But this nationalism has an ironic, even sinister edge, in

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<sup>9</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

Liebermann's musical realization. A typical march's tonic-dominant bass alternation on beats one and three is twisted into minor-third – root oscillation in this movement, an effect made more pungent by the major-mode melodic theme (m. 330 ff). Although the low instrumentation and atonality of the rondo theme's *b* section (m. 341) sound threatening, their juxtaposition with the comic imitative gestures and "wa-wa" effects in mm. 355-357 and 401-404 is ironic. The tortuous melody and dense counterpoint in the movement's center section (mm. 422-467), and bi-tonal second theme (mm. 350-373) further illuminate Liebermann's version of nationalism. Perhaps the movement is modeled after Shostakovich; the Russian master's officially-sanctioned patriotism is thought to have had elements of subversive irony as well. The arrival at "Poets to come" sparks a fanfare and choral declamation meant to arouse the reader/listener to action. But unresolved dissonance in mm. 561-564 leaves the outcome of the poet's command in doubt, and foreshadows the introspective third movement.

In the fourth movement, Liebermann's treatment of the poet's spiritual epiphany ("Swiftly arose") emphasizes the peaceful aspect of total self-knowledge.

Unaccompanied choral texture and hymn rhythm draw attention to the text and its religious sentiment. Liebermann's handling of textual repetition and parallelism is skillful. In each phrase, the anaphora "and I" is treated as an anacrusis. Although each pair of phrases begins with similar melodic and harmonic material, there is a continuous sense of growth from one to the next. Liebermann emphasizes individual words and phrases through stress or repetition, as with the accented "brothers" and following orchestral exclamation point (m. 757), and repetition of "and that a kelson of the creation is love" (mm. 762-771).

The setting of the return of the unaccompanied chorale in G minor in mm. 803-821 highlights and intensifies the poet's petition to "give me, give him or her I love this quenchless faith in thy ensemble." The plea "whatever else withheld, withhold not from us / Belief in plan of Thee," becomes more insistent through repetition, increased pitch and volume, and offset choral entrances. This section is part of a musical metaphor, in which the G-major resolution prepared from m. 781 is "withheld" until much later at m. 910. The highly-accented setting of "Health, peace, salvation universal" at m. 830 sounds more like entreaty than *fait accompli*, particularly when followed by the frantic F# orchestral allegro.

Liebermann responds once again to poetic imagery in his setting of "Give me to hold all sounds" (mm. 852-875). The antiphonal chorus over wind and string motor rhythms is an imaginative depiction of "all the voices of the universe" and their "throbbings." The rhythmic and dynamic vitality of this section and the ritard at its conclusion in mm. 874-875 add emphasis to the text of the following section, mm. 876-904. The chorus has a chordal, homophonic utterance, set against the instrumental theme from mm. 3-8:

Sing to my soul, renew its languishing faith and hope,  
Rouse up my slow belief, give me some vision of the future,  
Give me for once its prophecy and joy.

As unison chorus joins orchestral melody at "Give me for once" (m. 900), the urgency of the text's plea is reinforced. Liebermann then prolongs the uncertain outcome of the poet's petition with dissonance and tonal ambiguity in mm. 906-909, before granting "joy" in m. 910.

An examination of the fugue subject reveals a madrigalian treatment of the words, in that “glad” is an ascending melisma, and “culminating” reaches the highest pitch, a minor-seventh above the first note. The superimposition of chorale on fugue in m. 935 creates a tension that Liebermann says was not particularly meant to be symbolic; he simply liked the juxtaposition of joyous text and music with a “plea for faith”—represented for him by the chorale.<sup>10</sup> The hidden appeal for faith is uncovered by the return of the entreaty “Sing to my soul, renew its faith and hope” in mm. 951-960. This is the only poetic stanza in the fourth movement repeated in full, by unaccompanied chorus with the loudest dynamic marking in the symphony (*fff*). The minor chord on “future” and ensuing silence (mm. 959-960) leaves the chorus’s petition temporarily unanswered, but the fugue motif’s return in m. 970 conveys assurance of a future filled with joy.

From a prosodic standpoint, Liebermann’s text setting seems mostly utilitarian. He uses a combination of systems Wannamaker terms the “basic pulse” and the “measure unit” systems. In the former, meter changes to accommodate naturally stressed syllables in the poetic line. In the latter, the location of strong beats in the measure (in unchanging meter) guides placement of syllabic stress.<sup>11</sup> An example of Liebermann’s use of the basic pulse system is found in mm. 262-271. Natural stresses are indicated with an “x”:

x                    x                    x  
 Earth of the moun-tains mis-ty top’t!  
 x                    x                    x                    x                    x                    x  
 Earth of the vit-re-ous pour of the full moon all tinged with blue.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John Samuel Wannamaker, “The Musical Settings of the Poetry of Walt Whitman: A Study of Theme, Structure, and Prosody” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1972), 504.



Liebermann's setting of these two lines is in 3/4, 4/4 and 5/4:

Example 1: Basic pulse system, mm. 261-271

It is clear from this example that for Liebermann, prosodic considerations are sometimes secondary to development of musical themes. Since “Earth of the mountains misty top’t” is applied to the second theme (mm. 22-41), “of” falls on a strong beat in m. 263.

More complex examples of the basic pulse system are found in mm. 193-195 and 205-209:

X X X X X X  
I am he that walks with the ten-der and grow-ing night

X X X X X  
Press close bare-bos-om'd night

X X X X X  
Press close mag-ne-tic nour-ish-ing night

Example 2: Basic pulse system, mm. 193-195 and 205-211

a.

193 *mf*

A *mf*

B *mf*

I am he that walks with the ten - der and grow - ing night

b.

205 *stringendo* ♩ = 90 *Allegro* ♩ = 100

S night Press close mag - ne - tic... nou - ri - shing night

A Press close bare... bos - om'd night

T night

In the first excerpt, poetic stresses fall on each beat, with unaccented syllables fit in between as eighth- and sixteenth-notes. Regular pulse and shorter note values mimic walking motion in the poetic line and set up an effective contrast in the next phrase. The words “Press close bare-bosom’d night” carry stress on every syllable but one—a poetic effect that Gay Wilson Allen contends Whitman used to convey heightened passion.<sup>12</sup> In Liebermann’s setting, note values are lengthened when compared with the previous section, giving more emphasis to stressed syllables.

The measure unit system is employed in the chorale, mm. 739-771. Compare the following two phrases:

<sup>12</sup> Allen, 174.

Example 3: Measure unit system, mm. 745-752

a.

746  
*cresc.*  
 S And I know that the hand of God is the pro-mise of my own  
*cresc.*  
 A And I know that the hand of God is the pro-mise of my own  
*cresc.*  
 T And I know that the hand of God is the pro-mise of my own  
*cresc.*  
 B And I know that the hand of God is the pro-mise of my own

b.

750  
*mf*  
 S And I know that the spi-rit of God is the bro-ther of my own  
*mf*  
 A And I know that the spi-rit of God is the bro-ther of my own  
*mf*  
 T And I know that the spi-rit of God is the bro-ther of my own  
*mf*  
 B And I know that the spi-rit of God is the bro-ther of my own  
*f*

Working mostly within 3/2 meter, Liebermann distributes text so that the important words “know,” “hand,” “promise,” “spirit,” and “brother” fall on the downbeat of the measure. He accommodates the number of unaccented syllables in “hand of” and “spirit of” by simply making a triplet of the latter. The parallel occurrences of “God” fall on the weak second beat, but receive agogic accents within the measure. Although “that the” is set to two half-notes, static harmony offsets any stress from long note values. Finally,

Liebermann creates increasing stress on words through use of tonic accents in the upper voices.

Liebermann creates a cohesive libretto for the symphony through skillful selection and editing of Whitman's poetry. He unifies the diverse poetic excerpts through imagery and theme, and devises a logical progression of ideas. Moreover, he reveals his unique ideological ties to Whitman by the way he structures the musical realization of the text, and the dramatic emphasis he places on certain verses. Liebermann initially seems to revel in Whitman's description of the mysteries of the cosmos, as he sets the "Passage to India" text to the primary musical themes of the symphony. He displays his understanding of Whitman's "hidden prophetic intention" to celebrate the unity of body and soul with his extravagantly sensuous treatment of the "Song of Myself" excerpt. Contrasting earth images link the first two poetic excerpts; the mysterious heavenly body of the former becomes a voluptuous lover in the latter.

In the second movement, when Liebermann shifts his focus to what he calls "the darker side of things," the progression is logical from a poetic standpoint.<sup>13</sup> In a sense, the first movement's culminating celebration of earthly passions degenerates into a vision of a world where passion rules. Liebermann provides this textual inclusion at the beginning of the march:

All is a procession.  
The universe is a procession with measured and perfect motion.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

<sup>14</sup> Walt Whitman, "I Sing the Body Electric," *WPP*, 255.

He then composes a tightly structured rondo, which by its design illustrates the “measured, perfect motion” of Whitman’s universe.

The instrumental third movement’s lack of tonal center, aimless melody and series of unresolved dissonant climaxes represent the unfulfilled yearning and conflict in Liebermann’s search for spirituality. He sustains this tension for so long that it magnifies the dramatic impact when Whitman’s moment of spiritual epiphany finally arrives at the beginning of the fourth movement. Liebermann’s setting of this text is unlike anything else in the symphony. The simple reverence of the hushed, unaccompanied choral hymn effectively dispels the previous movement’s tension, and emphasizes the perfect peace that follows the poet’s epiphany. The remainder of the fourth movement demonstrates Liebermann’s struggle to fully accept and maintain the spiritual peace Whitman describes. He assembles a collage of texts, unified by repeated pleas of “Give me . . .”— faith, life, or vision of the future. Liebermann attempts to calm the clangor of voices by superimposing the chorale on the fugue. He eventually succeeds in merging all of the competing voices into one in final song of unrestrained joy.

### Core Musical Values

Lowell Liebermann’s aesthetic approach as revealed by his musical style in *Symphony No. 2* provides an equally important window into understanding both the composer and his music’s place in the context of current culture. An examination of the Second Symphony’s style confirms Liebermann’s three fundamental musical/aesthetic values: organicism, formal structure, and tonality. He describes his compositional process as “organic,” meaning that the larger elements grow out of the smaller elements: “My

material will either be a motive, or a fragment of melody, or a melody, or even an accompanimental figure, and hopefully all the material and the tonal structure will be developed out of that.”<sup>15</sup> The germ motive or idea is frequently found at the beginning of the piece. It may be a single note, as in *Piano Concerto No. 1* (op. 12, 1983), in which the organizing motive is a unison repeated B,<sup>16</sup> an ostinato pattern, as in the opening celesta part in the *Concerto for Flute, Harp and Orchestra* (op. 48, 1995),<sup>17</sup> or an extended melody, as in the first measures of *Symphony No. 2*.

Liebermann’s music also reveals his fondness for traditional structures and techniques such as variation, fugue, canon, passacaglia, and rondo. The composer clearly delineates sections with changes in texture, melody, and harmony, and frequently incorporates the germ motive into the larger form.<sup>18</sup> For example, in the *Sonata for Viola and Piano* (op. 13, 1984), the second movement’s seventeen-note passacaglia theme is drawn from motivic material in the first movement. The passacaglia becomes the foundation for a set of seventeen variations, with each statement transposed to the key of the corresponding note of the theme.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Hough, notes to Lowell Liebermann, *Piano Concertos*, Stephen Hough/BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Lowell Liebermann, conductor (Hyperion Records Ltd. Compact disc CDA 66966, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> McArthur, 101. This dissertation provides the most thorough summary currently available of Liebermann’s style.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-6.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Basrak, notes to *American Viola Works* (Cedille Records Compact disc CDR 90000 053, 2000).

Finally, Liebermann's music has identifiable tonal centers. He establishes tonality through a variety of techniques, including cadential patterns, pedal tones, ostinatos, and third relationships. Liebermann uses twentieth-century tools such as octatonic and synthetic scales, tone clusters, augmented triads, and major-minor ambiguity to blur tonal relationships.<sup>20</sup> But he often transforms an apparent dissonance or atonal segment into a related tonality. For example, in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (op. 41, 1993) for voice and string quartet, the implied C-minor tonality of the initial octatonic scale ostinato is confirmed by an Ab chord eight measures later. The vocal melody's emphasis on F# initially blurs the tonality through its tritone relationship with C, but is transformed when F# major becomes the tonal center in the second section. An analysis of *Symphony No. 2* will confirm the core values introduced above, and will provide a basis for deeper understanding of Liebermann's musical ideology.

### Organicism

Much of the thematic material in the Second Symphony is based on two intervals: a semitone and a fifth. The intervals are first heard in the opening melody as Cb-Bb-Eb. The first theme develops from these intervals, using sequence and variation:

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<sup>20</sup> McArthur, 248-51.

Example 4: Theme 1, mm. 3-13

Note the symmetrical *aba* form of the eleven-measure melody:

Table 2: Symmetrical form, mm. 3-13

<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>a</i>
mm. 3-6	7-9	10-13
2+2	3	2+2

The first part (mm. 3-6) is a 2 + 2 sequence, in which the second two measures repeat the pattern of the first two, a minor-third lower, with the semitone modified to a whole step. Measures 7-9 form the *b* section, which has a contrasting melodic contour and uncertain tonality due to chromaticism and enharmonic shifts. The *b* section overlaps with the return of the *a* motive in mm. 10-13, again in 2 + 2 configuration a minor-third apart. The ascending scales in the second *a* section (m. 11, 13) alter the sequence of whole- and half-steps from the first section, revealing Liebermann's subtle development of the initial thematic material.



Despite its intricate construction, the melody in mm. 3-13 constitutes a single, seamless entity. But Liebermann breaks it into small segments for development throughout the symphony, freely adjusting intervallic relationships to suit whatever tonality he is in. For example, with the entrance of the chorus in mm. 43-48 (with anacrusis), measures 3-8 are repeated verbatim. But in mm. 49-50 and 51-52, the melody from mm. 7-8 becomes a modulatory sequence. Thus, mm. 53-54 is a transposition of mm. 9-10, up a perfect fourth. This adjustment enables a return to the mm. 3-6 motive in the home key (mm. 55-58 with anacrusis):

Table 3: Motivic development, mm. 43-58

mm. 43-48 = 3-8	original key
mm. 49-50 = 7-8	up one whole step
mm. 51-52 = 7-8	up a fourth
mm. 53-54 = 9-10	up a fourth
mm. 55-58 = 3-6	original key

Thus in this example of Liebermann's organic approach, material from the opening theme provides the basis for repetition, development and variation throughout the work.

Measures 7 and 8 are frequently used for modulatory sequences. In mm. 298-311, the mm. 7-8 melodic pattern is used seven times in the orchestral accompaniment, in canon under the homophonic choral finale to the movement: "Therefore I to you give love! / O unspeakable passionate love!" The effect is of mounting tension, energy, and forward motion, peaking at the m. 312 cadence in Eb and the return of the mm. 3-6 melody, now in major mode:

Example 5: Treatment of mm. 7-8 melodic material, mm. 298-311

298

SA  
love

TB

Hp/  
Pno  
*ff*

Vln 1  
Fl  
Picc  
*cresc.*

Vln 2  
Vla  
*cresc.*

Vc/Bsn  
Cb/Cbsn  
*cresc.*

301

SA  
*cresc.* (+ Ob. EH)  
There - fore I to

TB  
*cresc.* (+ Cl. B Cl)

Pno

Vln 1  
Fl  
Picc

Vln 2  
Vla

Vc/Bsn  
Cb/Cbsn



Example 5—Continued

310

Tpts

Hns  
Tbns  
Tuba

SA  
speak - a - ble pas - sion - ate

TB

Pno

Vln 1  
Fl  
Picc

Vln 2  
Vla

Vc/Bsn  
Cb/Cbsn

The scale passage in m. 4 provides another basis for organic unity in the symphony. For example, the melodic and rhythmic material of the celesta in mm. 166-174 is clearly derived from m. 4, incorporating the germ interval of the fifth:

Example 6: Scales and fifths derived from m. 4 theme, mm. 166-174

The m. 4 scale pattern also provides the bass foundation in the first movement's coda, mm. 316-329, while the mm. 3-4 melody reappears in major mode in mm. 320-321 and 324-325. In the fourth movement, the mm. 4-5 melody is quoted in altered form four times, mm. 822-829. The quotation seems to be motivated by the poetic parallel between the texts of the two movements: “Belief in plan of Thee enclosed in Time and Space” (movement 4), and “O vast rondure, swimming in space” (movement 1).

Liebermann applies the organic principle in more subtle ways as well. Portions of the first movement's second theme (mm. 26-42) derive from the first theme. Note the close relationship of the melody in m. 28 to mm. 8-9, and m. 29 to m. 7:

Example 7: Comparison of second and first themes, mm. 28-29 and 7-9

a.

b.



The semitone interval figures prominently in mm. 193-200: “I am he that walks with the tender and growing night” (pitch of underlined words: G-F#-F-E); and in the F-Gb root-melody relationship in one of the second movement themes:

Example 8: Semitone relationship, mm. 350-352



Another march theme is a transposed retrograde of the semitone-fifth intervals in mm. 3-4:

Example 9: Relationship of march theme to opening theme, m. 391 and 3-4

a.



b.



Sometimes Liebermann applies the semitone relationship to the tonal scheme. The seemingly abrupt shift from G major to F# major in mm. 566-573 makes sense in light of Liebermann's organic concept, as does the chord shift from C major to Db major in mm. 176-180. A semitone separates the Eb-major/minor opening theme from the E-major second theme (m. 26) in the first movement.

Rhythm is another variable in the compositional organic process for Liebermann, in that he frequently uses it as a unifying device via ostinato figures, recurring patterns, or motor rhythms.<sup>21</sup> *Symphony No. 2* begins with a sixteenth-note ostinato in quintuple division. This rhythmic pattern continues without interruption through m. 68, providing continuity and harmonic support for the introductory themes. Liebermann then applies the five-note grouping to the melody in rhythmic augmentation in m. 19, 30, and 35:

Example 10: Rhythmic augmentation of quintuple division, m. 19, 30 and 35

a.

b.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 253.

c.

Vlns  
Fl/Picc

35

8<sup>va</sup>

5

*mf*

Pno  
Cel

5

5

5

5

The collective effect of this rhythmic augmentation is the sensation of expansion, which is a metaphor for the poetic depiction of space and time. Ostinato techniques prevail in both the first and fourth movements; in the first, 245 of 329 total measures contain an ostinato.

The second movement makes frequent use of ostinato technique, particularly in the bass instruments, e.g. mm. 330-340 and 358-362. In the third movement, mm. 574-599 have a half-note rhythmic ostinato, and a lyric theme in mm. 600-629 is supported by a triplet accompaniment pattern. Both of these rhythmic ostinatos recur throughout the movement.

Example 11: Half-note rhythmic ostinato, mm. 574-580

574

*espr.*

*mf*

*p*

Cl

Fl  
Vib  
Vla

3



Example 12: Triplet rhythmic ostinato, mm. 612-616

In mm. 711-738 the rhythmic pattern becomes a quarter-half-quarter for the first time, continuing to the fourth movement segue in m. 739. The two-measure ground in mm. 630-639 represents another type of ostinato. A two-part canon (mm. 640-645) follows, deriving its material from the pitch relationships of the ground. The fourth movement employs rhythmic ostinato in mm. 781-800 and 852-869, both of which provide uncluttered support for contrapuntal choral passages.

### Formal Structure

*Symphony No. 2* is in a single movement with four highly contrasting sections:

Table 4: Division of sections

- I: Moderato, mm. 1-329
- II: Tempo di marcia, mm. 330-565
- III: Largo, mm. 566-738
- IV: (L'istesso tempo), mm. 739-1027

The first “movement” is a rhapsodic span of 329 measures, unified both by motivic material established in the first thirteen measures, and cyclic structure supported by thematic and tonal recapitulation in mm. 294-329. The second movement is an orchestral march that concludes with the choral entrance at “Poets to come.” The slow instrumental third movement briefly quotes the fourth movement’s theme before engaging in lyric

reflection. A hymn-like chorale opens the fourth movement, which evolves into a grand finale, complete with a recapitulation of the first movement. The second and fourth movements provide ample material for discussion of Liebermann’s formal structure.

The second movement is an extended rondo structure with the overall form ABACADABACA. In contrast to a traditional rondo’s three sections, Liebermann’s rondo features four distinct themes. The “A” theme consists of two parts which are varied with each return. The larger structure of the rondo is difficult to discern at first, because with the appearance of the “D” section portions of the various themes are combined, and clear distinction between sections is blurred. The first theme’s two parts are as follows:

Example 13: Second movement two-part rondo theme, mm. 330-333 and 341-345

a.

Tempo di marcia ♩ = c. 120

Bsn

Vc  
Cb

b.

Vc  
Cb

The second theme is taken verbatim from “Marching Off to War” in Liebermann’s *Album for the Young* (op. 43, 1993) for piano. It has a rounded structure, represented here in part:

Example 14: Second theme in two parts, mm. 358-360 and 363-366

a.

Musical score for Example 14a, measures 358-360. The score is in 4/4 time and features three staves: Fl/Picc/Xyl (top), Tpt (middle), and Vc/Cb/Timp (bottom). The key signature has two flats. The Fl/Picc/Xyl staff begins with a rest in measure 358, followed by a melodic line starting in measure 359. The Tpt staff begins with a rest in measure 358, followed by a rhythmic accompaniment starting in measure 359. The Vc/Cb/Timp staff begins with a rest in measure 358, followed by a rhythmic accompaniment starting in measure 359. The dynamic marking *f* is present in measures 359 and 360.

b.

Musical score for Example 14b, measures 363-366. The score is in 4/4 time and features three staves: Fl/Picc/Xyl (top), Tpt (middle), and Vc/Cb/Bsn/CBsn (bottom). The key signature has two flats. The Fl/Picc/Xyl staff begins with a melodic line starting in measure 363. The Tpt staff begins with a rhythmic accompaniment starting in measure 363. The Vc/Cb/Bsn/CBsn staff begins with a rhythmic accompaniment starting in measure 363. The dynamic marking *f* is present in measures 363 and 364.

The third theme is first found in mm. 390-395:

Example 15: Third theme, mm. 390-395

Musical score for Example 15, measures 390-395. The score is in 4/4 time and features one staff: Vln I (top). The key signature has two flats. The Vln I staff begins with a melodic line starting in measure 390. The dynamic marking *f* is present in measure 390. The score includes various articulations such as accents and slurs, and a triplet in measure 394.

The fourth and final theme is sixteen measures long, characterized by this melody:

Example 16: Fourth theme, mm. 422-437

A structural outline summarizes Liebermann's sophisticated use of rondo form:

Table 5: Rondo structure, second movement

A mm. 330-350

Theme 1

- a. 330-333 2+1, F major/minor
- 333-335 2+1, treble transposed to B major
- 336-340 5 m, extended, modulatory without resolution
- b. 341-345 bass theme, F minor suggested
- 346-350 repeat in treble; bass counterpoint

B mm. 350-373

Theme 2

- a. 350-357 5+3, Bb minor
- 358-362 5 m. in two-part canon, bass altered
- b. 363-366 4 m. in two-part canon
- a. 367-373 7 m. in canon, altered and extended

A mm. 374-390

Theme 1

- a. 374-376 2+1, Bb major/minor
- 377-381 5 m, extended, modulatory without resolution
- b. 382-390 altered; motif from Theme 3 introduced

Table 5—*Continued*

<u>C mm. 391-410</u>	
Theme 3	
a. 391-395	melodic theme with anacrusis, Bb minor
396-400	repeated; bass altered
b. 401-404	cadential figure, Bb
a. 405-410	repeated; harmony altered; cadence F# minor
<u>A mm. 410-422</u>	
Theme 1	
a. 410-415	5 m. modulatory segment, F# minor
b. 415-422	includes motif from theme 3 in imitation
<u>D mm. 422-466</u>	
Theme 4	
422-437	16-m. melodic theme, A minor
437-452	repeat, add counterpoint [449ff <i>a</i> section from theme 2] [451ff <i>a</i> section from theme 3]
452-467	repeat theme 4 with counterpoint
<u>A mm. 467-480</u>	
Theme 1	
a. 467-471	5 m. modulatory segment, F minor
b. 472-480	original version
<u>B mm. 481-495</u>	
Theme 2	
a. 481-484	Bb minor
b. 485-488	
a. 489-495	
<u>A mm. 496-498</u>	
Theme 1	
a. 496-498	3 m. segment, Bb major/minor
<u>C mm. 499-517</u>	
Theme 3	
a. 499-503	theme with triadic harm., Bb M/m
504-508	repeat; bass altered
b. 509-512	cadential figure, Bb
a. 513-518	repeat melody only; bass altered
<u>A mm. 518-526</u>	
Theme 1	
a. 518-520	2+1, Eb major/minor
521-523	2+1, Gb major treble; bass in Eb
524-526	2 m, C major treble; bass in Eb
526	Cadence in Eb; Chorus entrance
<u>Choral Fanfare</u>	
526-565	“Poets to come!”, Eb major

The treatment of the first part of Theme 1 is notable for its gradual erosion. The first occurrence is in 3+3+5 measure increments, the second is 3+5 measures, and the third consists of only the five-measure segment. The condensed effect is the most extreme in mm. 496-498, when only a three-measure segment is heard. Irregular phrase periodicity pervades the movement, and thematic repetition varies widely. For example, the second theme's limited pitch range, centered around F, C and Gb (note the usage of fifth and semitone intervals) lends it an improvisatory quality, which Liebermann explores through varied repetition.

The fourth movement has a looser structure than the second. Its overall shape is based on the alternation and combination of chorale and fugue textures, summarized in the following chart:

Table 6: Structure of fourth movement

Measure #	Texture	Text
739-780	chorale	"Swiftly arose"
781-801	fugue	"Give me of God"
802-833	chorale	"Give me, give him"
834-875	fugue	"Give me to hold"
876-909	polyphony	"Sing to my soul"
910-950	fugue/chorale	"O glad exulting"
951-969	chorale	"Sing to my soul"
970-979	polyphony	"Give me for once"
979-1012	Recapitulation	"Joy!"
1013-1027	Coda	"All over joy!"

The chorale first appears at the beginning of the movement, mm. 739-771. Its thirty-three measures are broken into irregular phrases in a 7+(3+4)+(5+4)+(5+5) configuration. What begins as a clear G-major tonality is compromised in the second phrase as chromaticism and unresolved cadences allude to Bb major, F minor, Eb major,

and C minor. The second and third phrases (mm. 746-752), fourth and fifth phrases (mm. 753-761), and sixth and seventh phrases (mm. 762-771) are related melodically as well as harmonically. The first two pairs begin the same way but the second phrase of each modulates and extends.

Following an orchestral transition in mm. 772-780, the first fugue-like section occurs, mm. 781-801. Liebermann uses a D pedal tone and ostinato figure as accompaniment to the choir's imitative counterpoint, which contains four consecutive statements followed by a stretto in m. 793. This is not strictly a fugue. The entrances of the subject are ordered by ascending pitch (A-B-C#-D) rather than tonic-dominant alternation. Measure 802 brings a return to the chorale texture, which is rhythmically similar to the first chorale but has new melodic material. Again phrase length is irregular, and sequence and repetition provide continuity. The orchestra enters at m. 820, breaking the pattern and propelling the section to the declamatory choral statement in A major, mm. 830-833. The motive from the previous fugue-like section becomes the basis for the orchestral introduction and antiphonal choral treatment in mm. 834-875. The choir I soprano part beginning in m. 852 is a variation of the earlier fugue subject; the original version reappears in mm. 872-874.

The orderly alternation of chorale and fugue texture is broken in mm. 876-909. The four-part chorus is homophonic, with a slow harmonic rhythm based on A major and D major/minor. Ostinato orchestral figures accompany a dense chordal statement of the symphony's main theme from mm. 3-8. The mm. 7-8 sequence occurs four times in mm. 880-887. After quoting mm. 98-108 in mm. 894-904, and a four-measure transition, the fugue proper begins in m. 910. This fugue, which bears no resemblance to the earlier

fugual sections, is more traditional from a tonal standpoint, exhibiting clear tonic-dominant relations. The subject outlines a V7-I-V-I progression, which overlaps into the answer. The tonic of the subject becomes a V7 to begin the answer:

Example 17: Fugue subject, mm. 910-915

Allegro giocoso ♩ = 120

910  
S O glad ex - ul - ting cul - mi - na - ting song A vi - gor more than  
A

913  
S Earth's is in thy notes O glad ex - ul - - - - ting  
A O glad ex - ul - ting cul - mi - na - ting song A

The keys of the first four entries are C, F, Bb, and Eb. A false answer by the basses in m. 918 is followed by a full statement in m. 921. The first episode begins in m. 926, continuing until the choral unison in m. 948 which ends the section. Liebermann adds another element to the fugue, one which sets this section apart as a pivotal moment in the symphony. In mm. 935-949 the chorale from mm. 739-745 is superimposed on the fugue by brass choir. Measures 951-969 bring a return of the chorale texture with altered melodic and harmonic material, stated first by unaccompanied chorus, then by the orchestra. The brief episode leads to a polyphonic section in mm. 970-979, which is similar to mm. 876-909. The fugue subject from m. 910 inspires the orchestral counterpoint.



The symphony concludes with a recapitulation (mm. 979-1012) of the first movement (mm. 294-327), in the original key of Eb. Although the corresponding texts of the two movements are taken from different Whitman poems, their similarity provides justification for the thematic recapitulation:

Table 7: Comparison of texts in the first and fourth movements

<u>Movement I text</u>	<u>Movement IV text</u>
You have given me love	. . . joy!
Therefore I to you give love!	In freedom, worship, love!
O unspeakable passionate love!	Joy in the ecstasy of life!

The final coda in mm. 1013-1027 uses a major version of the theme from mm. 3-4, transforming the semitone into a whole tone. The sixteenth-note rhythms in m. 1019 are reminiscent of the second movement march, and the final two pitches reiterate Liebermann's germ interval of a fifth.

### Tonality

The above discussion included numerous examples of Liebermann's integration of tonality into motivic development and structural organization. Liebermann acknowledges that the Second Symphony is perhaps more "unambiguously tonal" than some of his other works—a feature he felt necessary for the celebratory occasion of the commission.<sup>22</sup> There are many examples of functional harmonic progressions in the symphony. For example, the D pedal tone that begins in m. 558 serves a dominant function for the ensuing G major at m. 566, even though the chords above it include

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<sup>22</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

Bb/E major, C major and C# diminished. The first phrase of the chorale (mm. 739-745) is a I-V7-I-vi-ii-I-V7-I-V progression in G. The following phrases explore related keys: the Bb in m. 746 is the bVI of V in G, and the progression that begins with unison Cs in m. 752 is in C minor and Eb major.

In the fourth movement, everything that occurs from m. 781 to the beginning of the fugue in m. 910 can be read as an extended dominant in G major, with resolution repeatedly avoided. Measures 781-801 have a D pedal, which finally solidifies into a D-major chord. Although there is a cadence on G minor in m. 803, it is brief. G major is present in mm. 821-824 as a tremolo, but is undermined by an Eb and a quote from mm. 4-5 of the first movement. The A-major choral outburst and ensuing F#-minor orchestral counterpoint relate to G as V of V, and its relative minor. The D-major arrival in m. 852 and D7 in mm. 874-875 strongly signal a return to G. However, the cadence is deceptive, and the following section vacillates between A and D major/minor. The long-awaited G-major resolution in m. 910 is obscurely approached by descending bass (Gb-Fb-Eb-D), with the final D functioning as dominant; also by the timpani's Ab pedal (mm. 906-909), which has a Phrygian cadence resolution to G. The clear tonality of the fugue and the superimposition of the chorale in m. 935 reinforce the centrality of G major as an arrival point. With the D7 to Ab deceptive cadence in mm. 950-951, the tonal motion is away from G major toward Eb major, which occurs at the grand recapitulation in m. 979. Unwavering tonic chords in mm. 1019-1026, and the orchestra's final unison Bb-Eb, confirm Eb as the overall key of the symphony.

When Liebermann's harmony is non-functional, he often smoothes seams between disjunct chords with common tones. For example, the Db-major—A-major

alternation in mm. 114-121 shares Db/C#. Another characteristic of Liebermann's conventional tonal approach is regularity of harmonic rhythm. Chord changes in this symphony frequently occur only on the first beat of the measure. Measures 230-236 and 283-289 provide brief examples of this phenomenon; a more extended illustration is found in mm. 526-564.

Although Liebermann's symphony is solidly tonal, it shows a wealth of techniques that temporarily obscure the key. The simultaneous application of major and minor tonalities—a technique prevalent enough in Liebermann's total output to be a characteristic trait—is evident throughout the symphony. For example, the clarity of the Eb-minor melody in mm. 3-5 is compromised by the recurring G-natural in the underlying ostinato. The opacity that results is an effective contrast to more solidly major-mode passages such as the one beginning in m. 83.

The tonality of Liebermann's melodies is often ambiguous due to chromaticism or the presence of the entire 12-note chromatic scale within a short span, e.g. mm. 14-21. The opening theme (mm. 3-7) encompasses ten different pitches in the distant keys of Eb minor and E major, with mm. 7-8 serving as pivot point between the two. The benefits of such melodic invention are realized in the myriad of potential harmonizations and modulatory material, which Liebermann uses to full advantage.

Augmented fifth chords and octatonic scales also obscure tonality in *Symphony No. 2*. In m. 1 the ostinato pitches G-Bb-Eb could be interpreted as Eb major but for the presence of Cb. The enharmonic B augments the triad, and with the Bb prefigures the melodic theme in m. 3. The *b* section of the second movement's rondo theme (mm. 341-345) is based on an octatonic scale:

Example 18: Octatonic scale derived from mm. 341-345



Regular alternation of half- and whole-steps in the scale and the absence of a root render the passage atonal, although G# is asserted by beginning and ending pitches. The same scale serves as a ground in mm. 630-639 of the third movement.

The most tonally adventurous section of the symphony is the instrumental third movement, in which tone clusters, extended chromatic melodies, and interrupted cadences impede clear establishment of tonality. The main material of the third movement begins in m. 574, following an eight-measure preview of the fourth movement chorale theme, in G and F# major. The V of F# minor in m. 573 resolves to A minor, with C and E as common tones. Measures 574-599 constitute a unit, whose (2)+8+8+8 periodicity is based on melodic contour rather than cadential motion. Although each phrase begins with a consonant major third, constant shifting of major to minor and absence of triads completely obscures the key:

Example 19: Obscure tonality, mm. 574-583

Liebermann offsets the tonal uncertainty of the above section with a lyric interlude in Ab major beginning in m. 600. The interlude's melody initially has the same

contour as the previous section, transformed into diatonic intervals in Ab and supported by an arpeggiated accompaniment. Measures 608-611 quote a melody from the first movement (mm. 193-95). The phrase beginning at m. 612 is an F-major transposition of the previous section, but an F#-major chord (m. 618) breaks the sequence. Measures 620-669 contain a series of frustrated climaxes with no discernible tonal progression. Although the G7 in m. 629 resolves melodically to C in m. 630, any tonal implication is destroyed by the octatonic ground underneath. A two-part canon using all twelve tones of the chromatic scale that begins in m. 640 is abruptly broken off at m. 646. Tone clusters provide dissonant foundation for wandering melodies in mm. 647-653 and 659-669.

The brief return to tonality in mm. 670-685 is a repeat of 600-615, transposed up a half-step. But the tonal interlude is interrupted by a sudden shift to F major in m. 686, and the F7 chord in m. 688 goes unresolved with the arrival of the Gb-minor chord in m. 689. The synthetic scale in the descending bass beginning in m. 696 provides no particular direction; nor do dominant-seventh chords in m. 707, 710, and 714. Measures 723-738 hint at Bb major, but the segue into G-major at m. 739 is unprepared.

#### Conclusion:

#### Liebermann in Dialogue with the Postmodern World

*Symphony No. 2* reveals Lowell Liebermann as a composer in dialogue with contemporary society. Liebermann's conscious adoption of traditional stylistic elements, his core musical values of organicism, structure, and tonality, his desire to communicate, and his intentional optimism are very much at odds with the postmodern world, which is frequently characterized as fragmented, depthless, and cynical. Paradoxically, his music

also demonstrates that he is a product of postmodern society. Liebermann's pragmatic ability to borrow musical stylistic resources from historical models, his efforts to reach a diverse audience through accessible music, his personal cynicism and appreciation of irony, and his embrace of Whitman's search for ultimate spiritual meaning mirror many present-day trends.

#### Derivation and Cultural Relevance

The anti-modern qualities of Liebermann's music are the most frequent targets of criticism, specifically with regard to the derivation of his musical language and the question of cultural relevance. An excerpt from a review of the Second Piano Concerto is representative of the criticism:

Mr. Liebermann's piece, his Opus 26, freeze-dries the Romantic piano concerto into a harmless 21<sup>st</sup>-century cup of coffee. The references to Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev are unashamed and nearly explicit.<sup>23</sup>

Dallas Symphony Orchestra music director Andrew Litton's apparent enthusiasm about the same piece has a critical subtext:

When I first heard Lowell's Second Piano Concerto, it struck me that it could have been Rachmaninov's Fifth or Prokofiev's Sixth, what the next concerto might have sounded like had they lived to write it. I thought, 'How fantastic that someone had the nerve to do this.'<sup>24</sup>

The implication is that Liebermann's music does not reflect stylistic developments of the last seventy-five years, and is so derivative of Rachmaninov and Prokofiev that it could

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<sup>23</sup> Bernard Holland, "Steinway Foundation," *New York Times*, 16 June 1992, sec. C, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Robert K. Schwarz, "Bringing Tonality, and Fans, to Contemporary Music," *New York Times*, 31 January 1999, sec. 2, p. 28.

easily be mistaken for their late works. Liebermann believes the only thing he has in common with late-Romantic composers is idiomatic piano writing:

Prokofiev is a composer who I never really particularly liked. I don't think my music has anything to do with his. Rachmaninov is a composer that I like, but I don't think my music has anything to do with his stylistically or harmonically. There's one moment in the Second Piano Concerto at the end of the last movement where the piano is playing in unison with the orchestra, and the gesture is somewhat "Rachmaninovian." But really, structurally and technically it has nothing to do with Rachmaninov. The reason I think people keep coming back to those two names in my music is that those are the last two composers that people heard really writing idiomatically for the piano.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, the lyricism, emotional contrast, and essential tonalism of Liebermann's music is closely identifiable with music of the Romantic era. But Liebermann bristles at labels like "neo-romantic" because he feels the label is a substitute for deeper understanding of the music on its own terms.<sup>26</sup> In fact, "neo-classical" is an equally valid label, if the structural craftsmanship of his work is taken into account. Liebermann sees himself as part of the continuum of classical tradition, building upon and extending what composers before have done. Perhaps his perspective is best described by pianist Stephen Hough:

Liebermann freely acknowledges a debt to the past and a conscious growth out of tradition, but his growth involves change and development. Unlike the reactionary who looks backwards *at* tradition, Liebermann looks forward *with* tradition, confidently employing modern techniques alongside materials of the past with a refreshing lack of self-consciousness or anxiety.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Hough, 9.

On the other hand, these “materials of the past” sound strangely *familiar*—a phenomenon that likely contributes to the music’s popularity with present audiences.

The difference between “building on the past” and being “derivative” may be irrelevant to Liebermann’s process, since he writes music first and foremost that pleases *him*.<sup>28</sup> While studying modernist composers like Berio and Boulez at Juilliard, and writing what he calls “self-consciously modern” music, Liebermann came to the realization that the music did not inspire him. He subsequently began to embrace tonality and traditional forms—against the coaching of David Diamond, who Liebermann says urged him to put “wrong notes” in the music to make it sound more modern.

The problem for critics is that it seems Liebermann has bypassed the entire Modernist movement of the twentieth century, which was driven by the quest for originality. By embracing tradition, Liebermann is making a decidedly anti-modernist statement. The charge that Liebermann’s music is not relevant to today’s culture is related to the modernist debate. For example, avant-garde music of the 1960s and 1970s is thought to have been closely tied to the idealism and rebellion of the youth movement, therefore reflecting contemporary culture. Using that context for Liebermann’s music, one critic remarked, “It remains to be seen how well a work [*Domain of Arnheim*] that expresses so little of its own time will stand up in another age.”<sup>29</sup> *Dallas Morning News* critic Scott Cantrell criticized the optimistic tone of *Symphony No. 2* as “foolhardy” in today’s

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<sup>28</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

<sup>29</sup> James R. Oestreich, “Old Forms in New Composition,” *New York Times*, 17 January 1991, 13C.



“cynical” age.<sup>30</sup> Liebermann responds, “I don’t believe in the cliché that art has to reflect its times—that since we’re living in a horrible age, our music has to rub your face in it.”<sup>31</sup>

The fallacy in these viewpoints is that they are based on the presumption that current culture can be defined in unified, literal musical terms. Robert Morgan eloquently summarizes the problem:

To the extent that music can be said to express the general spirit of an age it cannot be expected to mirror a consensus that does not exist elsewhere. At least until there is a profound shift in contemporary consciousness, it seems likely that music will retain its present pluralistic and uncentered quality. For music to change, the world will have to change.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the current Postmodern era (since 1970) into which all of Liebermann’s music falls differs significantly from the Modern era in several key ways. Examination of those differences and assessment of current culture is vital to continued discussion of Liebermann’s music, the Second Symphony in particular.

### Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism was an outgrowth of Enlightenment philosophy, which was characterized by the optimistic belief that absolute truths could be derived from application of reason, and rational thought in society would promote endless progress.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Scott Cantrell, “So-So Symphony: Predictability Stifles Joy in New Liebermann Work,” *Dallas Morning News*, 11 February 2000, 43A.

<sup>31</sup> Terry Teachout, “Back to the Future: The New Tonalists Make Modern Sound the Old Fashioned Way,” *Time Magazine*, 6 March 2000, 73.

<sup>32</sup> Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York: Norton, 1991), 489, cited in Arnold Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 389.

<sup>33</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge MA; Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1990), 13.

Early Enlightenment thinkers sought one unified answer, but by the mid-nineteenth century “the idea that there was only one possible mode of representation [of universal truth] began to break down.” In the arts, a period of diversity and experimentation around 1890 led to transition into modernity between 1910 and 1915.<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed the Death of God and the Death of Reason, was influential in the philosophical revolution. The void left by the absence of ultimate truths resulted in chaos—a state of affairs reflected in these famous lines by William Butler Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.<sup>35</sup>

For Nietzsche, the concept of “creative destruction” was fundamental to modern thought.<sup>36</sup> If a new world was to emerge, then everything that had come before would have to be destroyed. Art and music from about 1910 to 1930 sought to fill Nietzsche’s void through aesthetics, or “art for art’s sake,” resulting in individualism and experimentation. Poet Ezra Pound’s “make it new!” became the modernist artistic credo in the early twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> In music, this fundamental shift in values is represented by Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913) and the pre-World War I expressionist music of Schoenberg.<sup>38</sup> The modernist movement retained Enlightenment belief in progress, but the idea of one universal truth was abandoned in favor of multiple perspectives, or meta-narratives:

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<sup>34</sup> Harvey, 27-28.

<sup>35</sup> William Butler Yeats, cited in Harvey, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Harvey, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Powell, *Postmodernism* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., 1998), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Harvey, 28-29.

Modernism, in short, took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality.<sup>39</sup>

After World War II, the concept of linear progress found expression in the arts through the avant-garde, which became increasingly elitist:

The artist had to assume an aura of creativity, of dedication to art for art's sake, in order to produce a cultural object that would be original . . . . The result was often a highly individualistic, aristocratic, disdainful (particularly of popular culture), and even arrogant perspective on the part of the cultural producers.<sup>40</sup>

Composers like Boulez, Stockhausen and Babbitt became “guardians of high taste,” but as their art eventually came to represent “establishment,” the stage was set for a 1960s rebellion.<sup>41</sup>

Although scholars disagree about whether Postmodernism is a continuation of Modernism or a break from it, they generally agree that there was a significant philosophical shift around 1970. Whereas modernism valued the search for universal truths despite chaos and fragmentation in society, postmodernism embraces fragmentation, finding search for the “eternal” pointless, because even if universal truths exist, they cannot be defined.<sup>42</sup> Ihab Hassan makes the case that postmodernism is a complete reversal of modernist thought in this chart of polarities:<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey, 35-38; and Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music: A Concise History*, Rev. ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1994), 191.

<sup>42</sup> Harvey, 39-45.

<sup>43</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 267-8; cited in Powell, 17.

Table 8: Hassan’s comparison of Modernism and Postmodernism

<u>Modernism</u>	<u>Postmodernism</u>
form	antiform
purpose	play
design	chance
hierarchy	anarchy
art object/finished work	process/performance/happening
presence	absence
genre/boundary	text/intertext
root/depth	rhizome/surface

John Cage’s indeterminate music is a clear example of postmodern art’s lack of form, center, and hierarchy.<sup>44</sup>

The ephemeral quality of postmodern society eludes definition, but a brief digest of postmodern thought provides a pastiche of ideas for further reflection. For Fredric Jameson, who finds postmodernity a negative phenomenon, problems of today’s society are mirrored by television and media, which reveal the depthlessness and superficiality of the culture.<sup>45</sup> Jean Baudrillard believes “life has become TV, and TV, life,” meaning that television’s ability to copy real objects, or produce “simulacra,” is so keen that the copy becomes the new reality, which is “more real than real.” Moreover, the simulacra are so compelling and pervasive that they exert ultimate control over society, which as a result has become hyperconformist and obsessed with spectacle.<sup>46</sup> The current “reality TV” programming, which is arguably anything but real, illustrates Baudrillard’s theory.

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<sup>44</sup> Powell, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 36-7.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 51-65.

Postmodern architecture addresses fragmentation in society by appropriating styles from the past. Architectural critic Charles Jencks describes the resultant eclecticism as “double coding,” because rather than simply reacting against modernism by reviving the past, postmodern architects incorporate an ironic version of the past into modernism. Although double coding results in contradiction and ambiguity, it reflects postmodern society’s yearning for the missing center, even though it knows no center exists.<sup>47</sup> David Harvey notes that although postmodernism denies the concept of progress or historical continuity, it has “an incredible ability to plunder history and absorb whatever it finds there as some aspect of the present.” And since it refutes historical standards of aesthetic evaluation, postmodernism “can judge the spectacle only in terms of how spectacular it is.”<sup>48</sup> For Harvey, there are two possible reactions to the postmodern condition: embrace it in a kind of schizophrenic escapism, or deny it in an attempt to discover identity and meaning.<sup>49</sup> Although Lowell Liebermann consciously opts for the latter, his music nevertheless reflects some of the contradictions in postmodern society.

### Conclusion

Liebermann’s musical/aesthetic values are not as much at odds with his world as they first appear. Of his core musical values—organicism, structure, and tonality—only structure is distinctly anti-postmodern. If the current age is characterized by “antiform,” “play,” and “chance,” as Hassan illustrates, Liebermann’s carefully crafted rondo, fugue,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 80-82, 88-90.

<sup>48</sup> Harvey, 54, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 302.

and clearly contrasting movements in *Symphony No. 2* are anomalies. While tonality and the organic approach to composition are inherited from the Classic-Romantic tradition, rather than signifying Liebermann's reaction against postmodernity, they are simply two creative choices he has made among many valid possibilities. Liebermann's desire to work organically may be more of a sign of his ideological ties to Whitman, whose obsessive restructuring of *Leaves of Grass* was rooted in his desire to create an organic whole. Liebermann's writing tonal music is, however, a reaction against modernism, in which the quest for originality necessitated the abandonment of the tonal system. He is not alone in this reaction: since the 1970s a resurgence of tonal music has been led by composers such as Del Tredici, Argento, Rorem, and Harbison. Moreover, the unbroken chain of tonal composers throughout the twentieth century—once relegated to the background in the stream of progress—is more recently being reevaluated in kinder light.<sup>50</sup>

Liebermann's aesthetic conception of art is both pre-modern and postmodern in its desire to communicate:

I have an old-fashioned moral conception of art, that it can create a new form of reality that can lift people to a higher understanding of beauty. In a strange way, my music is my substitute for religion.<sup>51</sup>

He questions the elitism of post-World War II composers, whose disinterest in communication alienated both public and musicians.<sup>52</sup> Liebermann's attempt to

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<sup>50</sup> Elliott Schwartz and Daniel Godfrey, *Music Since 1945: Issues, Materials, and Literature* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993), 263-5.

<sup>51</sup> Lowell Liebermann, quoted by Alan Riding, "Making New Opera Unstylishly Melodic," *New York Times*, 22 May 1996, sec. C, p. 13 (L).

<sup>52</sup> Riding.

communicate is related to his choice of musical style. Since much of his music has an emotional directness today's audiences seem to understand, critics question whether Liebermann's neo-Romantic style is driven by his desire for commercial success.

Although Liebermann acknowledges all of his composition is the result of commission, he denies that the patronage system has any influence on his writing:

Ultimately I never wrote anything except music that I would want to listen to. So it's not even a question of writing for an audience. Yeah, it's writing for an audience, but it's kind of an imaginary audience that would be comprised of 2,000 "me's" sitting in the auditorium.<sup>53</sup>

But he values accessibility, and scorns critics who he feels have contempt for audiences.

In speaking about the celebratory nature of *Symphony No. 2* he remarks:

I wanted it to be in a language that was accessible. I find absolutely nothing wrong with accessibility. And critics . . . who have such contempt for audiences—anything that's at all accessible is bad just by it's very nature—like the public being what they see as ignorant. That gives them the power of being the high intellect who makes pronouncements and tells them what they should like and dislike. If the piece is accessible and the audience likes it, it totally takes the power away from the critic.<sup>54</sup>

Some critics suggest that Liebermann's music is so accessible that it does not challenge audiences. Scott Cantrell condemned Liebermann's *Dorian Gray: A Symphonic Portrait* as a bad movie score that asked little of its listeners, and classified it as escapism:

This is contemporary music for people who hate contemporary music, artistic escapism not so far removed from those Thomas Kincade pictures of never-never lands.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Scott Cantrell, "Nothing Wilde in 'Dorian Gray'," *Dallas Morning News*, 17 November 2000, 45A.

For Liebermann music *is* a kind of escapism, in that it should embody beauty rather than the anxiety of today's world.<sup>56</sup> There are moments in Liebermann's music, however, that seem deliberately geared toward the very audience that he fears cannot grasp subtlety. His treatment of "I am the poet of the body, and I am the poet of the soul" in *Symphony No. 2* (mm. 175-180) is one such example. The relentless *fortissimo* C-major chords and orchestral exclamation points seem designed to shake the audience awake rather than communicate the poetry.

Liebermann's appropriation of traditional musical elements is also ambiguous. Rather than signifying his desire to escape current culture, it likely is his answer to the lack of direction in postmodern society. The Romantic qualities in his music are often belied by distinctly unsentimental character or irony, as in the Second Symphony's march movement. In this, he resembles Jencks' postmodernist, who freely incorporates artifacts from the past, but with irony. And Liebermann displays the postmodernist tendency described by Harvey to "plunder" history for materials he deems relevant to his needs. If Liebermann plunders the Romantic era for musical language, as a postmodernist he readily adopts materials from other eras. He admits his choices can be quite arbitrary. When asked why he used a 12-tone row, Liebermann explained that he did it because he felt like it.<sup>57</sup> But as Jencks explains, choosing to incorporate materials from the past may reflect the artist's yearning for a "center," for some deeper ideal that s/he knows doesn't exist, but hungers for anyway. Liebermann's choice of Whitman texts and the way in which he set them in the Second Symphony reflect this yearning.

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<sup>56</sup> Garner, 20.

<sup>57</sup> Lowell Liebermann, interview by author.



Liebermann describes the fourth movement chorale as the spiritual center of

*Symphony No. 2*:

The chorale was all about spirituality, and the quest for faith. It's a plea for faith. It's not saying "I believe," it's saying "I want to believe, I desperately want to believe." . . . To me that text is about the lack of faith in the twentieth and twenty-first century, and man's desire for it. I'm not making a judgment call whether it exists. It's just that driving desire to believe in something.<sup>58</sup>

For Liebermann, search for meaning is best expressed by emotionally direct and genuine music, which serves as a tonic for what he regards as the present sarcastic age.<sup>59</sup> The Whitman lines Liebermann appends to the end of the Second Symphony's orchestral score provide a parting glimpse into the composer's mind and heart:

After the dazzle of day is gone,  
Only the dark, dark night shows to my eyes the stars;  
After the clangour of organ majestic, or chorus, or perfect band,  
Silent, athwart my soul, moves the symphony true.<sup>60</sup>

With this inclusion, Liebermann expresses his longing for depth and meaning in modern life—for the "symphony true" to which his music is only a prelude.

Although Liebermann's *Symphony No. 2* represents only one thread in the infinite tapestry of today's new music, it is the artistic creation of a composer whose ideology, as expressed through his musical style and Whitman's words, is of ultimate relevance for today's society.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Teachout, 73.

<sup>60</sup> Walt Whitman, "After the Dazzle of Day," *WPP*, 616.

## APPENDIX

TEXTS FOR *SYMPHONY NO. 2*

I

O vast Rondure, swimming in space,  
Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty,  
Alternate light and day and the teeming spiritual darkness,  
Unspeakable high processions of sun and moon and countless stars above,  
Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees,  
With inscrutable purpose, some hidden prophetic intention,  
Now first it seems my thought begins to span thee.

“Passage to India,” section 5 (*WPP* 533-34)

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,  
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

.....  
I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,  
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night!  
Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!  
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Smile, [O]\* voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!  
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!  
Earth of the departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!  
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon *just* [all] tinged with blue!

.....  
Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossom'd earth!  
Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!  
O unspeakable passionate love.

“Song of Myself,” section 21 (*WPP* 207-08)

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\* *Italics* denotes text added by Liebermann. Brackets [ ] denote Whitman text omitted by Liebermann.

II

Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come!  
Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,  
But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental, greater than before known,  
Arouse! for you must justify me.

“Poets to come!” from *Inscriptions* (WPP 175)

IV

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument  
of the earth,  
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,  
And I know that all men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and  
lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is love.

“Song of Myself,” section 5 (WPP 192)

Give me *of* [O] God to sing that thought,  
Give me, give him or her I love this quenchless faith,  
In Thy ensemble, whatever else withheld withhold not from us,  
Belief in plan of Thee enclosed in Time and Space,  
Health, peace, salvation universal.

“Song of the Universal” from *Birds of Passage*, section 4 (WPP 371)

Give me to hold all sounds, [(I madly struggling cry,)]  
Fill me with all the voices of the universe,  
Endow me with their throbbings, Nature’s also,  
The tempests, waters, winds, operas and chants, marches and dances,  
Utter, pour in, for I would take them all!

“Proud Music of the Storm,” section 5 (WPP 530)

Sing to my soul, renew its languishing faith and hope,  
Rouse up my slow belief, give me some vision of the future,  
Give me for once its prophecy and joy.

O glad, exulting, culminating song!  
A vigor more than earth’s is in thy notes,

.....  
Joy! joy! in freedom, worship, love! joy in the ecstasy of life!  
[Enough to merely be! enough to breathe!]  
Joy! joy! all over joy!

“The Mystic Trumpeter”  
from *From Noon to Starry Night*, section 8 (WPP 582)

## INTERVIEW WITH LOWELL LIEBERMANN

The following transcript is from an interview the author conducted with Lowell Liebermann at his New York residence, 14 August 2002.

[Transcript begins with Liebermann's reference to his Second Symphony.]

LL: What was interesting with that piece is, people are always accusing me of being derivative, and the critics who don't like me saying it sounds like Prokofiev or Bartók or Shostakovich or Stravinsky or Britten or whatever. They always pull out names, but Vaughan Williams is someone I've never been compared to. But in this case, because the texts were some of the same texts that Vaughan Williams used, all of the sudden my music sounds like Vaughan Williams, and it has absolutely nothing to do with Vaughan Williams. It's just some of these critics are so... their thought patterns are so limited, that it's like "Ah, Whitman text; it must sound like Vaughan Williams."

KK: Yeah, I remember that review, and it was not kind. I probably shouldn't talk about that particular critic on tape...

LL: Oh, why not? I'd be happy to.

KK: Can you tell me about your relationship with the Dallas Symphony?

LL: Now, no longer. The residency ended this past season. I was with them for 3 1/2 years. Basically the agreement was I would go to Dallas an average of one week a month during the nine month concert season and do educational activities and what not. And they were supposed to commission at least one major piece per season, which they didn't actually do. They owe me two commissions. The last year I came to Dallas a lot less than I did previously, because what would happen was I'd arrive in Dallas and they'd have nothing for me to do. And I'd go to the office on Monday and they'd say, "Oh, we don't have anything on your schedule this week." So it got to be a little bit frustrating, because the good will was there originally to really make this into an interesting residency. But because of financial limitations (there was never money to do anything I wanted to do like a chamber music series) I didn't have any significant input in programming. And so in a way it got to be kind of frustrating...very frustrating. And then they did this summer thing of contemporary programming, and they didn't even program a piece of mine, which to me was a big kind of slap in the face.

KK: They did a few years ago I remember, but...

LL: Yeah. Well that was right at the beginning of my residency.

KK: What was the other piece you did that they commissioned?

LL: They commissioned a suite from my opera, *Dorian Gray*, and they commissioned a piece for the children's concerts. It was the one that contained a character that was strangely reminiscent of the music critic from the *Dallas Morning News*. So ever since then he's been really out for blood.

KK: Wasn't it "Slimius Criticus"?

LL: Yes.

KK: Did I read that you knew Andrew Litton [DSO music director] at Juilliard?

LL: Very vaguely. We never socialized. In fact I don't know if we even said hello to each other. When the residency started it was something that they wanted to put across--"oh we were buddies at Juilliard together, and everybody hung out" and what not.

KK: How did the *Symphony #2* get commissioned, and what parameters were you given?

LL: Dallas took part in the commissioning of my Flute and Harp Concerto years ago. They were part of a consortium that commissioned it. So Dallas did that—not with Andrew conducting, it was Keri Lynn Wilson conducting. Then they performed my Second Piano Concerto. About that time, Gene Bonelli [DSO president] approached me and said they wanted to commission a big symphony for the millennium and for the DSO centennial. I said "great," and they said, "and also would you be interested in a residency?" So I said "sure." But the first thing was the symphony. They basically said they wanted a piece that would be half the concert, 30-45 minutes. They wanted it to use chorus, no soloists, and they wanted extra brass in the balconies. I didn't really want to do the extra brass, so I made the extra brass so that it's optional, because something like that could really limit performances. Otherwise it's a fairly standard orchestra.

KK: Did they specifically ask for the organ?

LL: Yes, oh yes. They wanted the organ. The choice of texts was up to me. Of course they wanted to approve the texts, and that was the real difficult thing for me. I mean I spent hours and hours looking for an appropriate text. It demanded something celebratory, but I wanted something celebratory that wasn't mawkish, or—what's the word? It's hard to find upbeat texts that are not cliché or whatever. So I scoured through practically the entirety of American literature—I wanted to do American texts. I kept coming back to Whitman. I've always liked Whitman's poetry and have done stuff in the past. In fact, one of the very first compositions when I started writing was based on "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking": a set of three piano pieces when I was 13 years old or something. But I kept coming back to Whitman. The thing is there was no one poem that would work for me totally. In the poems there would be a paragraph that I thought was great, and then there was something I could not possibly set to music. Whitman is very

difficult. He has all those long lists; he has all that kind-of overstated rhetoric and what not. I finally just thought, "I'm going to take the bits that I can use and stick them together into my own texts," more or less. And I think that worked out pretty well. In terms of the reviews it's been kind of divided. Some people say it was a very effective job of dealing with the texts and some people say that I was messing around with the texts, and what nerve do I have?

KK: His poetry endures I think partly because everyone finds something different in it they really identify personally with. Is there any particular aspect of Whitman that attracts you?

LL: Yeah. I grew up on Long Island (you know a lot of Whitman is set on Paumanok—the Indian name for Long Island), and I loved those Whitman poems that deal with the sea and the beach, like "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." I loved the ones that were about nature and very simple things. I'm not terribly fond of the overstated grand ones with all the lists of "O ye" this and "O ye" that. For this symphony, it was not necessarily a matter of loving the texts or identifying with them so especially, but finding the texts that would serve the purpose of what I had to write. When you set texts, it's not always the best poetry that sets effectively. It's not even necessarily poetry that you like very much. It's funny, because when I was selecting the text, one of the closest poems I could find to what I was looking for was that inauguration poem that Maya Angelou wrote for Clinton, and it's really terrible poetry. It's just not very good writing. She's a popular poet and everything, but it is not great literature by any stretch of the imagination. But for my purposes that was very close to what I was looking for. So we actually thought at one point of trying to commission someone like her to write a text for this. But then that seemed too risky. I'm very particular about what texts I can set, but I couldn't tell you why. It's just a question of I look at a text and I instantly know, "yes, I can set this to music / no, I can't set this to music."

KK: It doesn't have to do with syllabic stresses or anything like that?

LL: Nothing that technical. It's more the choice of words. I'm not a composer who would have an easy time setting a rhapsody about concrete and steel. To me that is not something that demands music. It has to be something that demands music. But also, if the poetry is too good, if it's too complete and too well-formed and everything, there's nothing for the music to add. So in a way, it sounds like it's criticizing the texts, but it isn't. There has to be an element that I feel is missing that I can add musically. Or at least, room for the music. If it's too perfect... like setting a Shakespeare sonnet for me would be almost impossible, because they are perfect objects and there's so much music there already. Adding music to that would just be weakening it.

KK: Does it have something to do with imagery?

LL: Imagery is very important. That's what I meant by the concrete and steel fences. Those images don't cry for musical depictions. I don't go about writing music by trying to

depict things musically; it's more a question of creating a musical atmosphere that the words can be heard in.

KK: You chose a very famous section of the poetry with "Poets to come," where he is calling for future artists, musicians and poets to interpret him. Is that something you see as your role—as prophetic?

LL: No. I guess I like the thing about interpreting, because it's almost an excuse for giving myself leeway with his texts. I put in a built-in apology in the piece in a way. But I actually don't think too much about the future. I don't try to second guess where my music is going, because I think that's been one of the biggest pitfalls of a lot of contemporary composers and artists. This is such a historically-obsessed period, and everyone is obsessed with making whatever they do permanent, in terms of recording, or having it published, or being "out there." Except, of course, for those artists who have reacted against that, or are using impermanence as the basis of their art—but that's something totally different. Because so many artists are obsessed with that, and I think we're such a historically-obsessed culture, they've tried to figure out in advance what they should be writing, what kind of art they should be creating. Which to me is putting the cart before the horse. I think it has to come out in the music. It's not history that decides the art and artistic progress, it's the art that in retrospect builds the history. There is no progression. There is no really clear thing. So all I do is try and write the best music I can. And try and say something; hopefully try and add something of beauty to this world. I'm not interested in creating art that reflects the worst aspects of civilization. That doesn't interest me. So for that reason, I don't think ahead to where should my music be going. I find in just working with the materials, they tell me where to be going.

KK: I read something that said that this culture is obsessed with taking it's temperature all the time, which is kind of what you're saying. We're so conscious of history and how we fit in. It's very interesting. You mentioned the Vaughan Williams. Were you influenced by any other Whitman settings?

LL: No, in fact, I think I've actually heard the Vaughan Williams once, probably 25 years ago. And Vaughan Williams is certainly a composer I can say with great surety has not been an influence on me. I actually do like Vaughan Williams, but I think he was a very uneven composer. But a lot of these critics are always pulling out names of composers who I'm supposedly influenced by, who I either don't particularly like, or actively dislike. And they do it on a very superficial basis. Because they listen to something and it momentarily reminds them, they say it's an influence. A lot of those kinds of things are very subjective and have little to do with what's actually going on structurally or technically or musically. In terms of other Whitman settings, I don't really know of any beyond the Vaughan Williams and Delius.

KK: The Hindemith "Lilacs" setting....

LL: Oh, the Roger Sessions, which is an extremely ugly piece.



KK: Roy Harris was big into Whitman.

LL: Oh yeah! For instance that was a name, all of a sudden that was cropping up—that my symphony was influenced by Roy Harris. I know one piece of his really, the Third Symphony, which is a piece I dislike. It just is absolutely not my thing. So all of a sudden because Harris is known to have set Whitman, it's a name that crops up in the reviews of this piece. Nothing could be farther from my music than that kind of Americana. Did Lukas Foss do a Whitman setting? Oh no, he did the Sandburg.

KK: No, he did do a Whitman. I've forgotten what it's called but it's just a phrase here and there that all say something about music. It's a cantata.

LL: I suppose he couldn't stand setting a whole poem.

KK: How would you describe the musical style of your symphony in relation to your other music?

LL: I would say it's very consistent with the rest of my music. Perhaps parts of it are more unambiguously tonal than other pieces. But to me the piece demanded that. It was to be a big public piece. To my mind there is nothing wrong with a composer making certain decisions and even writing the music for a particular occasion. A lot of these composers are like, "Oh nothing can interfere with my great vision," and what not. Really that's nonsense. Composers ever since Bach and Mozart wrote pieces on hire, and certain things would just be appropriate for certain pieces. Mozart would write *divertimenti* for dinner parties as background music, and there was no shame in that. He would just do it very well. So for this, it was to be a big celebratory piece. I knew they would not want a turgid, depressing, ugly piece; it would not have been appropriate. I wanted it to be a language that was accessible. I find absolutely nothing wrong with accessibility. And critics like Scott Cantrell, who have such contempt for audiences—anything that's at all accessible is bad just by its very nature—like the public being what they see as ignorant. That gives them the power of being the high intellect who makes pronouncements and tells them what they should like and dislike. If the piece is accessible and the audience likes it, it totally takes the power away from the critic. That's what I find is going on with certain of these critics, like Scott Cantrell. But there was also a very personal and rather political thing going on. He's been extremely unethical and it really had way more to do with back door politics at the Dallas Symphony. That I found reprehensible, and that is why I went after him in that "Pegasus" piece.

KK: Do you do most of your work as the result of commissions?

LL: All of it.

KK: In a hypothetical situation, if you were not writing something that was aimed for a particular audience, do you think that would change your...

LL: No, no it wouldn't change my style, and that's the ultimate irony. When I started writing when I was at Juilliard, it was the heyday of Milton Babbitt and Eliot Carter, and Sessions: the real academic avant-garde writing really very difficult music. By writing tonal music, I was really sticking my neck out. You just were not supposed to do that. I remember getting into big arguments with David Diamond, who I was studying with, who you would think would be very open to that. But no, in fact he was always trying to get me to put wrong notes in the music to make it sound more modern. Saying, "Oh, the critics will go after you if you write triads like that." Ultimately I never wrote anything except music that I would want to listen to. So it's not even a question really of writing for an audience. Yeah, it's writing for an audience, but it's kind of an imaginary audience that would be comprised of 2000 "me"s sitting in the auditorium.

KK: I recently heard a recording of Danielpour's *American Requiem*, which is very tonal.

LL: Oh yes. Did he use any Whitman?

KK: Yes he did. He used the "Dirge for Two Veterans," and something from the Lincoln memories section. It was interesting. But he was at Juilliard at the same time as you, wasn't he?

LL: He started doing that later. We were at Juilliard at the same time, and the music he was writing then was atonal and quite complicated. He was one of the composers who later kind of shifted his style with the wind change. I do think he seriously believes in the music he's writing now, but he did not start out that way, with that kind of conviction. In fact, there's a recording on New World of his piano sonata, which he wrote right at that time we were a Juilliard together, if you want to get an idea of what his style is. It's very knotty, atonal writing.

KK: Do you think the paradigm of the way the compositional schools work, with that sort-of self-consciously modern attitude, is changing? Or is it still difficult...

LL: It's changed in that, what's been called the "New Tonal" music or neo-Romantic music (and I think most of these labels are stupid), has achieved a lot of acceptance. Whereas 20 years ago, you simply couldn't even get performances of that kind of music, generally, unless there was some really trendy aspect to it. David Del Tredici was the one who opened the door to that with the "Final Alice" piece. But you still have a very dedicated academic avant-garde, and critics who support it are now waging battle against all this, what they see as horrible, simple-minded tonal music. That's one of the frustrating things, because my music is as carefully structured and thought out as any academic avant-garde piece, or whatever you want to talk about. But because it's tonal and there's melody, it's often just dismissed without people hearing deeper into it.

KK: More specifically about the Symphony, can you talk about the structure of that work? It's got a cyclic element to it.

LL: A lot of the work stems from the opening theme and the opening accompanying harmonies, and it's got this fifth and semitone thing going on. I would actually have to sit down and look at the piece again and go through it to tell you what I did in it, because each new piece obliterates the memory of the last piece I did. But I wanted it to be in one span, that there wouldn't be movement breaks.

KK: But there are definite sections with greatly contrasting character.

LL: Oh yeah. Basically four movements that are connected. You are right in that it is cyclical. All the movements share the same motivic material that is derived from the opening, if you just look at the intervals. I usually try and integrate that with whatever key structure is going on; that what keys I'm going to and what keys are being pinpointed has some relation to the motivic elements. Beyond that, this piece by its nature would be less rigidly structured than a non-vocal work because there's a text. If it's a purely instrumental work it's usually carefully structured in musical terms. As soon as you add text, text imposes its own structure in a certain sense. With a text there are two kinds of structures or forms. There's one that's imposed by the text, which is more about mood and atmosphere, highs and lows, and that kind of thing—more of a superficial kind of structure. Then there's the musical structure—what you're actually doing with pitch relations, what kind of key center. But because of the demands of text, somehow that imposes more of a structure where other musical elements become secondary. Not secondary, but... There's something very secure feeling when you're working with a text because you always know where you're going. I like writing vocal music for that reason.

KK: When you compose do you have an inspiration for what the big picture is going to look like, or do you work sequentially?

LL: Both. I will usually have the idea of what I want the overall big structure to be and then from there work sequentially. For example, I knew before I wrote a note that there was going to be that chorale and there would be a fugue with the chorale superimposed on it. In fact, the whole thing was building up to that.

KK: Yeah, I felt like the chorale section was the spiritual center of the piece.

LL: Yes. I think that might have even been the first bit of music that I sketched, that chorale. And I knew I wanted it as a peroration with this fugue, and the chorale would come through that.

KK: Was there some symbolism in putting it with the fugue?

LL: No it was just, if you look back at the text, the chorale was all about spirituality, and the quest for faith. It's a plea for faith. It's not saying "I believe", it's saying "I want to believe, I desperately want to believe." It was just the juxtaposition of the search for faith and the whole joy thing. Scott Cantrell just didn't get it. Because he wrote something about it being like a "revival meeting" or something like that?

KK: A "new age revival."

LL: He was putting it down because of what he saw as mawkish religious sentiment, basically I think because the word "God" is in the text. He totally missed it, because actually to me that text is about the lack of faith in the twentieth and twenty-first century, and man's desire for it. I'm not making a judgment call whether it exists. It's just that driving desire to believe in something. I grew up totally without any religion. So I've always had very ambivalent feelings toward religion. It's a rather strange thing, because I'm very conscious of that need to believe in something beyond one's own petty little mind. To me that text very much put a thumb on that kind of feeling. And I think that was very much Whitman's situation too. He was not atheist or agnostic or pantheistic, but he kind of believed in everything and nothing at the same time.

KK: You mentioned that you had done a solo setting of "On the Beach at Night." It's the same thing there in a way, the clouds obscuring the stars and the child not believing that they're there anymore...the question of faith.

LL: Yeah, yeah. The first Whitman I set was a three-movement piano piece called "Three pieces based on Walt Whitman" or something like that. It was actually the first thing I ever played in public, at one of those New Rochelle Music Teachers Association concerts. It was three little piano pieces based on "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," which I had read, and I'm sure I didn't understand it totally. I always liked Whitman, always read Whitman, but found the texts impossible to set to music. I tried before. I did do the one Whitman setting, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" just using the first paragraph. That was the first Whitman setting I did, and found it somewhat difficult. I do find his language difficult to set to music. Just because of the rhythm, and it's so "snaky", and he'll have a whole poem with basically no grammatic pause. There are commas, but often no conclusion to the thought. That's hard to make a musical phrase out of because it just keeps going. And then I did not set anything until the symphony. The symphony really put me at ease with setting his poetry. So when I had to write a big song for this recital Robert White was doing at the Metropolitan Museum, I went back to a sketch that I had from when I was about 15. I had started trying to set "On the Beach at Night," and I just wrote a page and I couldn't get beyond that. I went back to this sketch and finished it.

KK: Was the march section of the symphony brought about by any textual association?

LL: Yeah, that's the section that concludes with the "poets to come" section, and there seemed something almost jingoistic about that passage to me. It just cried out "march" to me. But actually, one of the themes in the march is taken from a set of children's pieces I wrote, my *Album for the Young*. It's called "Marching Off to War." I used the theme, not only because intervallically it fit right in with the whole motivic thing that worked a lot with fifths, but also the whole militaristic thing. To me that whole movement is supposed to be ironic-sounding. It's kind of the negative side of things. The entire symphony couldn't be "rah-rah, upbeat, life is great"; it had to have its darker moments.

KK: About the chorale... In "Song of Myself," that text comes after an incredibly graphic sexual passage, and this is the epiphany that follows.

LL: Oh right, right.

KK: Was there anything in your music that had to do with the context?

LL: No. No. I was rather shameless about taking Whitman out of context, putting texts next to things that would change the context. Yeah, in the "Song of Myself" it is in a sexual context, but I think it's Whitman seeing the sexuality as spiritual and all part of this. To me it was just besides the point. It wasn't necessarily changing his meaning by having it out of context.

KK: And it probably wouldn't have flown with the Dallas Symphony patrons anyway...

LL: No, I don't think it would.

KK: I noticed from the premiere and the recording to the proof that there was a word change, and I wondered if that was intentional.

LL: Which one? There were a couple of mistakes.

KK: The original phrase was "I am the poet of the body" and the proof says "I am the spirit of the body."

LL: The proof says "spirit?" It shouldn't. Because in the Whitman poem it's "poet." That's a mistake then. I think that was corrected in rehearsal. You know a lot of times when you're setting a text a lot of it is often done from memory, even if you have the book sitting next to you on the piano. You think you're referring to it, but it's sometimes surprising how the words change by themselves. In fact when I did the "On the Beach at Night" I left out a whole line by mistake, which I later put in.

KK: Do you think that Whitman's poetry calls for any particular style?

LL: No. At least with my own music, I don't think the musical setting should be anachronistic to the poetry, but there should be some kind of a fit. For my purposes, Whitman does conjure a big kind of rhapsodic—I hate to use the word "romantic"—style but I could just as easily imagine another kind of Whitman setting—much more sparse and gritty—that would be equally valid.

KK: I did get to look at your "Out of the Cradle." You omitted quite a bit of the poem.

LL: I just took the first page. And that was because the piece was required to be a certain length. That first section seemed to be a contained unit, and the focus kind of shifts after that. I thought it worked well. I don't think I left out anything within that.

KK: There are long sections in the poem that are italicized...

LL: Yeah, that all follows. If I remember correctly.

KK: Are there any recordings planned of any of your vocal works?

LL: Yeah. In fact, I did a whole CD of all the stuff that could be done with tenor and piano, with Robert White, for Arabesque Records, who received grant money to put out this recording. We made this recording three years ago and they've made no attempt to publish it. So I may have to bring legal action against them actually. Koch is coming out with several recordings of my stuff. One of them is a recording of all my flute chamber music, and includes a vocal piece which is on Yeats.

KK: How about the Second Symphony? Have other orchestras done it?

LL: There was a performance scheduled by this chorus, I think in St. Louis. They were going to do a big 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of St. Louis, and the director was e-mailing me that he thought it was a total masterpiece, and he was so excited and honored that I could come. The first half was going to be a piece they had commissioned by a local composer to celebrate the occasion and the second half would be my piece. Then they called me up and said that my piece would totally overshadow the commissioned piece, and therefore they couldn't do it. It was kind of the nicest cancellation, you know. They claim they're going to do it in a subsequent season, but I'm not holding my breath for it to be performed anytime soon. In this climate, like the DSO is cutting pieces that have any extra players and what not, it's an expensive piece to do. And it has difficult choral parts. The DSO chorus did just a magnificent job, but there are not a lot of choruses out there that can pull the thing off in such a short amount of time. They were only working on it seven weeks or something. Most other choruses would have to work on it for half a year.

KK: I imagine the recording will help promote it eventually.

LL: I hope so. Usually a piece is done, it's recorded, then there is usually a lull for a couple of years. Then the performances start happening. It was that way with most of my orchestra pieces that now get performed quite frequently. The piano concerto.

KK: I think this was in reference to the *Domain of Arnheim*, and one of the reviewers said "it remains to be seen how well a work that expresses so little of its own time will stand up in another age." Can you respond to that?

LL: Well that would be like saying the "Magic Flute" couldn't possibly last because it doesn't express anything of its own time. Any piece of music that's set in another time. I remember that review. He was probably talking more in terms of musical materials. But he was absolutely wrong. I remember in that review he wrote that it was something that could have been written in the nineteenth century and that there was nothing in it that

would have shocked old Poe. Well the guy would have had to be deaf. Because there are atonal passages in it. There are all kinds of passages with triad cluster things going on, and I don't know what these people are listening to. Again, I think that plays into the cliché that important art is of its time and has to reflect the grittiness of now. I think that's baloney. Music history is full of composers from Bach to Brahms to Rachmaninoff to Samuel Barber, Shostakovich even, who in their day were dismissed by the supposedly progressive critics as being hopelessly conservative or reactionary. And now they are the ones who are seen as the standard repertoire, not the ones who were seen as the revolutionaries. Who were the revolutionaries in Rachmaninoff's time? They were people like Leo Ornstein [pianist/experimental composer, 1893-2002] or George Antheil [modernist American composer, 1900-59] or people like Webern. But I'm sorry, I think Rachmaninoff is going to way outlast Webern. In terms of performances and public appreciation there's no contest. The critics will always say that stuff. It's just par for the course. Bach was considered a reactionary; Brahms; the only thing one can do as a composer is ignore that. Luckily there are just as many people who are behind the music.

KK: So you're not really concerned with how you will be viewed, or your legacy?

LL: Just out of selfish reasons. Because I'm not going to be around. So whatever happens, happens. Yeah, I'd like to think that it would survive and be performed. But quite frankly at this point, I don't have any doubt that it will be. I have pieces that are performed hundreds of times a year that are spoken of as being standard repertoire. My flute pieces.

KK: The Second Piano Concerto?

LL: Well it's not performed hundreds of times, but in the last 3 months its been done by 3 different student concerto competitions. One a college level, one a high school level. When it starts getting to that point, where young students are learning it... My publisher told me that when a big piece is commissioned and premiered, it's usually done once and forgotten. He said when other orchestras pick it up, it's a very good sign. He said when the university orchestras start picking it up, that means it really has a foothold. He said it's almost unheard of that high school orchestras will start picking it up, which has been the case with a few of my pieces. It just means it's that much in the repertoire. I'm not worried. I have no lack of performances.

KK: You mentioned that you see your music as part of a continuum. What do you mean by that? Are there specific references, or more in just a general way?

LL: You probably could point to specific ones, but I think when I said that I meant that to me one of the clichés of modern art is this thing that's always taught in the art school—that each movement is a disavowal of the past and a break with tradition. And it's always those artists who break with tradition that are trying to be the brave revolutionaries. To me that's total nonsense. You look at the repertoire. It is a continuum. Composers build on what the composers before them have done, and extend it. Some do bring new things in, but there are other composers—Mozart, for example—who did nothing new. He just

took what was around him and did it better than everybody. He wasn't a real revolutionary in that sense. To me, doing it well is much more important than being the first one to do it.

KK: So who are your big influences?

LL: Well early on, Bach, Beethoven, Shostakovich—late Shostakovich especially. There's a composer named Frank Martin, Busoni, the late Liszt works—those funny little enigmatic pieces. The influences change, but Shostakovich was a huge influence, actually before he got really trendy. And Britten.

KK: Andrew Litton was quoted as saying when he first heard your Second Piano Concerto it struck him that it could have been Rachmaninoff's fifth or Prokofiev's sixth if they had lived to write them.

LL: Yeah, there we go again with the Prokofiev and the Rachmaninoff. Prokofiev is a composer who I never really particularly liked. I don't think my music has anything to do with his. Rachmaninoff is a composer that I like, but I don't think my music has anything to do with his stylistically or harmonically. There's one moment in the Second Piano Concerto, at the end of the last movement, where the piano is playing in unison with the orchestra, and the gesture is somewhat Rachmaninoffian. But really, structurally and technically it has nothing to do with Rachmaninoff. The reason I think people keep coming back to those two names in my music is that those are the last two composers that people heard really writing idiomatically for the piano. Bartók writes wonderfully for the piano, but it's a very particular, percussive, dry kind of writing and it's not real virtuoso writing. So when they think of this kind of virtuoso writing, they automatically think to Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff. It has more to do with the technical pianistic thing than the actual musical elements.

KK: Is that what you think Litton was talking about? Because he's not just a critic.

LL: Yeah, I think he's coming from a kind of pianist mentality. He played all those pieces. So I think it's a very superficial comparison. Because really, if you're talking musically, there's much more going on that comes from Shostakovich than Prokofiev or Rachmaninoff. If people bring up Shostakovich, I'm fine with that; that I'll acknowledge. Prokofiev is actually a composer that, well I shouldn't say "dislike" anymore, because I've come to the point where I admire the wealth of imagination, but what I dislike about the Prokofiev is there's no real structure. It's just one tune, one idea thrown after another without anything being related or linked. It's a very sloppy kind of musical mind to me.

KK: I've read that you like to describe your music as organic. What does that mean?

LL: I like it being very controlled in that all of the elements will grow out of very little material. Like I was talking about with the symphony. My material will either be a motive, or a fragment of melody, or melody, or even an accompanimental figure, and



hopefully all the material and the tonal structure will be developed out of that. If the theme works with fifths and semitones, then the key relationships will also work with fifths and semitones.

KK: I've studied several of your pieces that treat 12 tone rows in a tonal way. What's the motivation for this?

LL: It's a question of just using whatever elements are around that I feel like using in a piece. I do not believe in 12 tone music. I don't believe that tonal implications can be avoided, just because of the overtone series and stuff like that. However, 12 note music has given us certain tools that we can use as composers, and maybe use them better than Schoenberg originally intended them to. I'll often use a 12 note row for a passacaglia idea. The reason I like that, is by using a 12 note row it gives you the most possible tonal variety, just because all the notes are there. What I'll often do is use the 12 note theme as a passacaglia theme and then each variation will be in the key of one of the notes, so that you go through all 12 pitch centers. I like that. Sometimes I've used it, like in my opera, almost symbolically. Dorian Gray's theme was a 12 note row, but I used it to write this very tonal opera. It was almost a metaphor for the novel which is all about appearances versus reality. The outside of the person versus the inside, corrupt core. I like that kind of ambiguity of using a non-tonal theme to generate all this tonal music.

KK: Does it also have something to do with providing a discipline for yourself?

LL: No. Writing 12 note music for me is no more discipline than writing any other music. It's just instead of using a C major scale, you're using a 12 note row. Or an octatonic scale. I just finished a concerto for orchestra. Most of it is built on an octatonic scale. You just have to decide at some point what your materials are. Funnily enough, your initial choice of materials is sometimes the most arbitrary part of composing. You have to begin somewhere. The act of composing is always trying to find justification for what notes you're putting down. Why you're putting down this note rather than that note. But when you're beginning, there's no justification, no reason, you just have to begin somewhere. Sometimes it's just "I'm going to use a 12 note row as part of my materials."

KK: What are you working on now?

LL: Well I finished this concerto for orchestra. I now have to write a piano sonata, two flute trios, a nocturne for piano, and another opera.

KK: Do you know what you're going to use for the opera?

LL: Oh yeah. It's being commissioned by Juilliard for their centennial, so it will be done in the 2005-6 season. It's a novel by Nathaniel West called *Miss Lonely Hearts*. That's a project I'm really excited about, because it's something I've wanted to do for years. The rights to the novel were very difficult to acquire. A lot of people have tried in the past.

KK: Do you see your music going in any particular direction from here?

LL: I try not to look at that. I take it one piece at a time. There have been changes in my style that I can see. Not radically. But I think the best example is Beethoven. If you look at his music, the whole nonsense about 3 periods is a vast oversimplification. If you look at Beethoven's opus from work to work, you really see where he shifts his attention. I mean he'll try something out for 3 or 4 pieces and then he'll move elsewhere. That's really what it's like. When I was a student at Juilliard my music was very much more chromatic and atonal, and I was very obsessed with counterpoint. Then I went through a period where I felt I had to come more to terms with a non-contrapuntal type of writing. Then my focus shifted and I became very interested in clear tonality. You shift focus as an artist as you get interested in other things. Sometimes it's hearing a piece or a composer that you haven't concentrated on before that makes you think in one direction or another, or sometimes it's just that you get tired of what you've been doing and you want to try something different.

KK: Would you like to write more choral pieces?

LL: Yeah, I like writing choral music.

KK: I don't know of anything choral you've written except the *Missa Brevis* and the *Choral Elegies*.

LL: I did three Elizabethan pieces. Those are published by Presser. One of them in fact I wrote for Andrew Litton's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Choral music just does not get done very much anymore. I think choruses in general are dying out all around the country. When they do give concerts they're going to do the *Messiah* or *Elijah*. So it's difficult to get one's choral music done. And being a practical composer, I tend to write for combinations that I know are going to get performed. Again, I don't think there's any shame in that. There are some composers out there that insist on writing these gargantuan pieces for orchestras with five clarinets, and they'll never get performed.

KK: You mentioned something about Roy Harris. Do you regard your music as particularly American?

LL: I don't, especially since all the influences that I see have been European. However, I've had a lot of people tell me, especially Europeans, that my music sounds extremely American. I don't exactly know what they're listening to or what they mean by that. It's very funny. You take someone like Copland, who we now think of as being very American sounding—that he really created the American sound. But if you look at the music, it's really coming out of that French modernist kind of school. Who knows, if he had been Polish, that might now be the "Polish" sound. I think a lot of these things are quite arbitrary. What is it about open fifths that's so American? Does Mozart sound particularly Austrian?

KK: I think that's a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon—the whole search for a distinctly American sound.

LL: It's a search for labeling. That has a lot to do with the press and journalism. A lot of these critics are simply not capable of listening to a piece of music and discussing it on its own terms. They don't have the technical equipment or vocabulary, so they need labels to be able to discuss things. They tend to deal in overgeneralizations and stereotypes.

KK: One more question: Since you're a New Yorker, I was wondering where you were on September 11.

LL: Here.

KK: How did that affect your life?

LL: Well, it was very ironic, because previous to that, I had a disaster with a music copyist. He was supposed to do a job for me, in fact it was the Dorian Gray suite for Dallas. He did the whole opera on computer and he was supposed to extract the suite. I told him which measure numbers to extract and put into a score form, and then I would just make some corrections and that would be the suite. It was a very straightforward job. He called me the day he was supposed to deliver the finished job and told me he couldn't do it. Which meant that I had to enter from scratch the entire suite, rather than just basically doing a cut and paste job. So this had a domino effect on all my commissions, and I lost about three months. It got to the point where September 1<sup>st</sup> I was supposed to deliver two fifteen-minute pieces, neither of which I had begun. September 10 I finished the second of those pieces. I wrote these two fifteen-minute pieces in ten days. A piano trio and this piece for two pianos. I went to bed the night of September 10, or early morning September 11<sup>th</sup>, absolutely exhausted like I've never been before. Literally I was writing 14 hours a day, and not eating, and I was a mess. I thought, "I can finally sleep in. I'm going to take the next two weeks off and do nothing, just go shopping and enjoy myself" and what not. And the phone rings at 9:15. I thought, "My luck, the one day I really need to sleep in, and who is this asshole calling me?" And I don't pick up the phone, and 10 minutes later, the phone starts ringing every 10 minutes. And I'm thinking "this is unreal." And finally at like 11:15 or something I pick up the phone and it's my friend William in California. And he said, "do you know what's going on?" and I said "no." And he told me. I don't have a TV, so I turned on the radio, and spent the next three days sitting in front of the radio. Everybody was scared to leave their apartments. Nobody knew what was going to happen. And we were trapped on the island of Manhattan. The next two weeks were just like a blur. It was unbelievable being here. And then all the smoke started drifting uptown. It was horrible. In fact, I did not compose anything for a good 4 or 5 months after that. It wasn't so much as a direct result of that, but then I had to start traveling again and my schedule was just very tight. I wasn't in a position to sit down and write again for a while. It was traumatic. A lot of people said "How is this going to affect your music?" I don't know. You can't help being affected as a human being by an event that traumatic. But does it have a direct effect on your music? I don't

know. I always tried to keep my music very separate from my life. The music has always been kind of a better world that I'm creating. So I don't know, ultimately. No, I'm not going to write any September 11 symphonies or anything like that. You wouldn't believe how many bad... Since September 11, every score that was submitted to me at the DSO was a September 11<sup>th</sup> piece. Including one September 11<sup>th</sup> symphony, movement one: "the first plane crashes"; movement two: "the second plane crashes." I mean it was unbelievable. The opportunism. I was in Dallas shortly after that and this journalist says, "Are you going to write something based on September 11?"—you know, with this eagerness. I said to her, "You know I could not possibly imagine trivializing an event like that by writing a piece of music about it." It was too close and too horrible. I don't feel I'm up to having anything meaningful musically to say about that. No. The whole idea is very distasteful to me.

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