A PIECE OF STEAK: A CHAMBER OPERA

by

DAVID SACKMANN

A THESIS

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Music degree in the School of Music and Dance by:

Robert Kyr  
David Crumb  
Jack Boss  

Chairperson  
Member  
Member

and

Scott L. Pratt  
Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

David Sackmann

Master of Music

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Title: A Piece of Steak: A Chamber Opera

A Piece of Steak is a chamber opera in four scenes based on the Jack London short story of the same name. The piece is composed for five operatic soloists, a chorus, a voice actor, and a Pierrot ensemble with percussion, and is 25-30 minutes in duration. The libretto that I have written for this piece follows an aging boxer and his wife as he prepares for an important match for the future of his family. The characters in A Piece of Steak deal with issues related to poverty, family, and the broader sports culture and the treatment of athletes.
CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR:  David Sackmann

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

   University of Oregon, Eugene, OR
   Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA

DEGREES AWARDED:

   Master of Music, Music Composition, 2016, University of Oregon
   Bachelor of Arts, Music (Composition Emphasis), 2013, Gonzaga University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

   Vocal and Operatic Composition
   Wind Ensemble Composition

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

   Adjunct Faculty, Music, Gonzaga University, January 2016-Present

   HFCA/Diversion Specialist, Catholic Charities of Spokane, June 2016-Present

   Graduate Teaching Fellow, Music Composition University of Oregon, September 2015-July 2016

   Senate Executive Coordinator, University of Oregon, October 2016-June 2016
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. SCENE ONE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. SCENE TWO</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. SCENE THREE</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SCENE FOUR</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX: LIBRETTO</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INSTRUMENTATION

Lizzie (Soprano)
Tom (Tenor)
Coach (Baritone)
Butcher (Baritone)
Landlord (Baritone)
Chorus
Radio Broadcaster (Voice Actor)

Flute
Clarinet
Piano
Violin
Cello
Percussion
SCENE ONE

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Flute

A Clarinet

Piano

Violin

Violoncello

Percussion

Slowly, building \( \dot{=} 68 \)
molto accel.

Allegro \( \dot{=} 120 \)

K.D.

Sus. Cym.

f

mf

p

f

mf

mf

mf

mf

f

f

f

David Sackmann
A great match for our entertainment.
but I've heard he's lost a step.

This San del kid is exciting, we always love to see a new athlete.
I saw King working on the tracks, he must be short on money. That's what
Should we feel sorry when you grow old as a boxer.

Slower \( \approx 98 \) poco rit.
he'll have to try and win to-night.

He knew what he was getting into.

If he wants the money.
Speak of the devil, isn't that his wife?
Please, just a little more.

I'm sorry Lizzie, I've stretched out as far as I can for...
The kids are hungry, and Tom needs strength for the fight tonight.

Liz.: There's nothing you can pay?

Bu.: You.
We’ve already been paid the loser’s purse, but Tom will get the winner’s share tonight, you know how good he
I know how good he was, but he's not long for the ring anymore. No one can help you? No clubs no coaches? They
They only help out as long as he's the champ. When he loses a
used to take such good care of you.
match or two they're no-where to be found.

Please, just a lit - tie more, he needs his
"I'm sorry Liz, I just don't think he'll win. I'm sorry."
Is there any-one who can help? Is there any-one who cares? You used to cheer for him, buy him
drinks, and celebrate him in the ring. Is anyone who can help? Is there anyone who
Liz. cares? He has a fam'-ly who de-pend on him. This man that you all wan-ted to be seen with, to be friends with.
Liz. needs your help now. Is there anyone who can help? Is there not for a washed-up boxer.
anyone who cares? You used to cheer for him, buy him drinks, and celebrate him in the ring.

On-ly if he wins. San del's our new boy
Is there anyone who can help? Is there anyone who cares? He has a
family who depend on him. This man that you all wanted to be seen with, to be friends with, needs
Andante \( \text{q} = 82 \)

He's won big before. He's made plenty of money.

Andante \( \text{q} = 82 \)

He's won big before. He's made plenty of money.
We'll care a gain we'll make you rich a gain if he can beat the kid.

We'll care a gain we'll make him rich a gain if he can beat the kid.

We'll care a gain we'll make him rich a gain if he can beat the kid.

We'll care a gain we'll make him rich a gain if he can beat the kid.
Is that enough, Tom? We need you strong for the fight.

I guess it'll have to

Sus. Cym.
I don't need to eat tonight. Neither do the kids, I sent them to bed early so they wouldn't be.
Liz. 

get hun·gy

I got the flour from the fam·ily cross the hall.

Tom

That's all we have?

LL.

Fl.

pp

pp

Pno.

Cl.

Vln.

Vc.
Our last money was for the bread.

Bli-mey, but couldn't I go for a piece of
I tried both Burke's and Saw-ley's.
Not ev-en half a pen-ny, they said.

steak. And they would- n't?

poco rit. \( \frac{q}{=90} \)
He was thinking...

He was thinking San-de'd do you tonight.
Liz.:

Tom, you know we love you.

Tom, you know that we believe in you, but we need you to...
fight hard. We need you to win. Tom, you know we
Liz. love you, Tom, you know that we believe in you, but we need you to fight hard.
We need you to win. Tom, we need that winner's purse.

[knocks on door]
I've given you all that I have from the loser's

Tom, Liz... I need this month's rent.
I've floated you a few weeks, but the new month is coming up soon. If you can't get through this month,
If I can win tonight, you'll have rent for the next six weeks.

You'll be too far behind.
But where will we...?

months.

If you don't win tonight, you'll have to leave by next week.
Liz. go?

Tom

What is the time?

LL.

Ask your fam' ly, find a fan, I can't let you stay if you don't pay.

Fl.

Pno.

Vln.

Vc.
Lento = 64

Liz.

Quar-er be-fore eight. What was that?

Tom

I don’t go on for more than an hour. My train-ing. My train-ing. Liz-zie.

LL.

Fl.

Cl.

Pno.

Vln.

Vc.

Cym.

Lento = 64

mp

mf

p

mf

Lento = 64

mp

pp
No spare part, and so little food. I ain’t had proper practice. When I was younger, I could
train all day, at a gym in Australia. When I was younger, didn't need to run in the early mornings.
be-fore long days lay-ing tracks. With-out e-nough food and train-ing, a box-er can't put
food on the table. I hope my time in the ring can make up for my lousy training. I'm getting old for a boxer.
though still quite young as a father
but I'm afraid that my body won't come
Tom, you know we love you...

Tom, you know that we believe in you...

through.

When I was young...

Without enough food and
We love you, but we need you to fight hard. We

training, a boxer can't put food on the table... When I was younger...
need you to win. Tom, we believe in you. Tom, we need that

I'm getting old for a box-er, though still quite young as a father. Liz-zie, we need that
Liz.

winner's purse.

Good luck,

Tom

winner's purse. I'll have to leave, it's a couple miles walk to the venue.
Tom. You got-ter do 'im.

Ay, I got-ter do 'im. That's all there is, I just got-ter do 'im.
"King wins" I used to hear, not so long ago. When I was champion of New South.
Wales, and the money would flow. "King wins!" I wish someone told me to learn a trade. But I know
"I wouldn't have listened."

"King wins!" It was so intoxicating. The roar of the crowd, sports.
columns the next day. I could go a fast twenty rounds. Hammer and tongs, fight fight fight, from gong to gong, round to round.
Sav-ing the best for last. "King wins!" The crowd on their feet, blood rush-ing through my veins.

"a tempo \( \approx 74 \)"

"a tempo \( \approx 74 \)"

"a tempo \( \approx 74 \)"

"a tempo \( \approx 74 \)"
Big money for a night's work, and nothing in between. I had so many friends wanting to know me.
I'd never pay for a drink. "King wins!" It was the old ones I was beat-ing. But now
I'm the old one, and they try the kids out on me.
Youth is invincible, only age grows old.
Hi Coach.

Andante $q = 78$

You know this kid is fast, you know this kid is fierce. You need to be smart, use your experience.
He doesn't need to conserve his energy. He'll wear himself out trying to knock you out early.
But you do. You'll have to dance with him a while, wait for your chance. Let him wear himself out, and leave himself open.
I don't know coach, my training has been awful this time.

Then you'll have to land the knockout.
round. I'll make sure I have the strength to land it. If I just had that

It's the only way, all you'll need is one good blow.
piece of steak... I'll do him in when he gives me the chance.

What was that? At - ta - boy.

That's him, that's him, the

That's him, that's him, the

That's him, that's him, the

That's him, that's him, the
great Tom King. That's him, that's him, the great Tom King.

He's the greatest in all of Australia.

great Tom King. That's him, that's him, the great Tom King. Don't you know him?

great Tom King. That's him, that's him, the great Tom King.
There he is! San del. There he is! The

He's getting old now, past his prime.

There he is! San del. There he is! The
new kid.

If he can beat old King we will know that he's for real.

If he loses, he can go back to New Zealand for all we care.

new kid.
There will be someone else to take the crown from old Tom King. We only have room in our hearts for winners.

Andante →82

There will be someone else to take the crown from old Tom King. We only have room in our hearts for winners.

There will be someone else to take the crown from old Tom King. We only have room in our hearts for winners.
begin our premier match this evening. The long time great Tom King, wearing blue, squaring off against the youngster from New...
Do him in, Tom.

Remember Tom, you need to absorb.
And here we go. And Sandel is all over King right at the get go. A furious rush of quick punches falling all over King.
Come on, King; get him.

King faints back, shakes it off and is back in a defensive position. Shaking it off like a pro. Sandel comes back at him. Another flurry of punches and the crowd going wild? King, who is insisting on taking the punishment, is waiting for some sort of opening to attack.

And

Come on, King, get him.

Come on, King, get him.

Come on, King, get him.

Come on, King, get him.
Sandel's legs buckle and he tumbles onto the ring. He is rolling around as the referee is beginning his count. Sandel now on one knee. 7, 8, 9, and he's back up! Another flurry from the youngster as King goes back on the defensive.

King lands a heavy blow to Sandel.
Liz

Tom

C

R

S

A

T

B

Fl.

Cl.

Pno.

Vln.

Vc.

Allegro \( q = 120 \)

D

How you doing, Tom?

And that's the end of the first round.

Fl.

Cl.

Pno.

Vla.

Vo.
jaw and I'd have a knock-out.

He has the energy to waste.

He's wasting energy with those punches at the bell.
And now we kick off round two. More of the same from Sandel. King is not wasting any energy. Taking small hits in his own corner and waiting to pounce.

Come on, King, put up a fight!
He’s losing energy, wait and strike!

fight you old bum!
Sandel does not look to be okay as King is hammering away. They might need to call this fight...

You've got him.

Yeah, get him, Tom!

Yeah King, get him, Toni!

Yeah King, get him, Toni!

Yeah King, get him, Toni!
Ah, and the round ends. Sandel is trying to get his wits about him.
He is trying to convince the police chief to allow him to continue fighting.
The referee nearly called that one, and a few more seconds in the round and
Sandel would have not recovered.

Stay with it!

I had him there. This guy sees odds and I'd have
kicked him out. It was a two mile walk to the venue, and I could have...
Come on Tom. One more...

used that piece of steak. I might have one in me, but I'll have to bring everything.
And here we begin the third round. Sandel is much more careful after his last attack from the experienced King.
King and Sandel are dancing around, not giving any ground. Sandel begins landing blows again. King absorbing.
King begins his attack again. Quick strikes with an energy that we haven’t seen from him all night!

Yeah Tom, go get him.
A flurry of punches, but King is starting to lose energy. Sandel steps back, King folds up and delivers a huge right hook to Sandel's jaw.

He's got him!
Stay down.

If I just had that piece of steak...

San-del is now getting up on his knees. 7, 8, 9, and the
That was his chance.

Kid is back up! With a flurry of energy he comes back on the attack.

Yeah, San del. Finish him out!

Yeah, San del. Finish him out!

Yeah, San del. Finish him out!

Yeah, San del. Finish him out!
Get up, Tom. Get up!

He's out.

San-del loads up and oh! A punish-ing blow to King. King is on the ground. He doesn't seem to be mov-ing.
7. 8. 9. and that's the match! There's a new champion here in Australia. The torch is passed from the legendary Tom King to the up and comer Pete Sandel, who knocks the one time great out in a classic match.
Is there anyone who can
Andante \( \approx 82 \) \( mf \)

I need... we need that match

And in what is most likely the final match of his storied career, Tom King puts up a great fight, but is no match for the youngster out of New Zealand. I don't know what King's next chapter is, but I have to imagine we won't be seeing him in the ring again.
help?

Is there a ny one who cares?

San - del the new king of Aus tra lia!

We'll al ways love you, San - del

Drinks are the new king
The old man is washed up.

You used to cheer for him, buy him drinks, and celn-e-brate him in the ring.

He has a

Don't let King fight a-ny-mor, the old man is washed up.
Liz: family who depend on him. Is there anyone?

Tom: 

I'm sorry Tom, I don't think we can book another fight.
Who can help?

Is there anyone who cares?

What am I going to tell Liz zie?
APPENDIX

LIBRETTO

A PIECE OF STEAK: A CHAMBER OPERA
David Sackmann

CHARACTERS:
Tom (Tenor)
Lizzie (Soprano)
Butcher (Baritone)
Landlord (Baritone)
Coach (Baritone)
Radio Broadcaster (Voice Actor)
Chorus

I. Scene One
_Chorus is sitting outside, reading an advertisement for the upcoming Sandel-King boxing match._

1) Chorus

CHORUS:
King. Sandel. A great match for our entertainment. Old and new. King was a great, a champion, but I've heard he's lost a step. This Sandel kid is exciting, we always love to see a new athlete. I saw King working on the tracks, he must be short on money. That's what happens when you grow old as a boxer. Should we feel sorry for him? He knew what he was getting into. If he wants the money, he'll have to try and win tonight. Speak of the devil, isn't that his wife?

_Lizzie is off to the side, speaking with the butcher._

2) Duet

LIZZIE:
Please, just a little more.

BUTCHER:
I'm sorry Lizzie, I've stretched out as far as I can for you.

LIZZIE:
The kids are hungry, and Tom needs his strength for the fight tonight.

BUTCHER:
There's nothing you can pay?
LIZZIE:
We've already been paid the loser's purse, but Tom will get that winner's share tonight, you know how good he is.

BUTCHER:
I know how good he was, but he's not long for the ring anymore. No one can help you? No clubs no coaches? They used to take such good care of you.

LIZZIE:
They only help out as long as he's the champ. When he loses a match or two they're nowhere to be found. Please, just a little more, he needs his strength for Sandel.

BUTCHER:
I'm sorry Lizzie, I just don't think he'll win.

LIZZIE:
Just a little...

BUTCHER:
I'm sorry.

3) Aria-Duet

LIZZIE: (turning away from butcher and towards the chorus and the town)
Is there anyone who can help? Is there anyone that cares? You used to cheer for him, buy him drinks, and celebrate him in the ring. He has a family, who depend on him. This man that you all wanted to be seen with, to be friends with, needs your help now.

Is there anyone who can help?

CHORUS:
Not for a washed up boxer.

LIZZIE:
Is there anyone that cares?

CHORUS:
Only if he wins.

LIZZIE:
You used to cheer for him, buy him drinks, and celebrate him in the ring.

CHORUS:
Sandel's our new boy now.
LIZZIE:
Is there anyone that can help? Is there anyone who cares? He has a family, who depend on him. This man you all wanted to be seen with, be friends with, needs your help now.

CHORUS:
He's won big before. He's made plenty of money. We'll care again – we'll make you rich again – if he can beat the kid.

II. Scene Two
*Tom and his wife, Lizzie, are eating dinner at a small table in a modest kitchen.*

4) Recit

LIZZIE:
Is that enough, Tom? We need you strong for the fight.

TOM:
I guess it'll have to be.

LIZZIE:
I don't need to eat tonight. Neither do the kids, I sent them to bed early so they wouldn't get hungry.

TOM:
That's all we have?

LIZZIE:
I got the flour from the fam’ly, ‘cross the hall. Our last money was for the bread.

TOM:
Blimey, but couldn't I go for a piece of steak.

LIZZIE:
I tried both Burke's and Sawley's.

TOM:
And they wouldn't?

LIZZIE:
Not even a half a penny, they said...

TOM:
Go on, what did they say?
5) Aria

LIZZIE:
He was thinking... He was thinking Sandel'd do you tonight.

Tom, you know we love you. Tom, you know that we believe in you, but we need you to fight hard. We need you to win. Tom, we need that winner's purse.

(there is a knock at the door, Tom opens the door to the landlord)

6) Trio

LANDLORD:
Tom, Lizzie, I need this month's rent.

TOM:
I've given you all that I have from the loser's purse.

LANDLORD:
I've floated you a few weeks, but the new month is coming up soon. If you can't get through this month, you'll be too far behind.

TOM:
If I can win tonight, you'll have rent for the next six months.

LANDLORD:
If you don't win tonight, you'll have to leave by next week.

LIZZIE:
But where will we go?

LANDLORD:
Ask your fam'ly, find a fan, I can't let you stay if you don't pay.

(Landlord leaves)

TOM (speaking to Lizzie):
What is the time?

LIZZIE:
Quarter before eight.

TOM:
I don't go on for more than an hour.
(quietly) My training...

LIZZIE:
What was that?

TOM:
My training, Lizzie. No sparring partner, and so little food. I ain’t had proper practice.

7) Aria

TOM:
When I was younger, I could train all day, at any gym in Australia. When I was younger, didn't need to run in the early mornings, before long days laying tracks. Without enough food and training, a boxer can't put food on the table. I hope my time in the ring can make up for my lousy training. I'm getting old for a boxer – though still young as a father – but I'm afraid that my body won't come through.

8) Duet, Aria reprise

LIZZIE:
Tom, you know we love you…

TOM:
When I was younger...

LIZZIE:
Tom, you know that we believe in you...

TOM:
Without enough food and training, a boxer can’t put food on the table...

LIZZIE:
We love you, but we need you to fight hard...

TOM:
When I was younger…

LIZZIE:
We need you to win...

TOM:
I’m getting old for a boxer, though still quite young as a father.

LIZZIE:
Tom, we believe in you. Tom, we need that winner's purse.
TOM:
Lizzie, we need that winner's purse.

(Recit)
I'll have to leave, it's a couple miles’ walk to the venue.

LIZZIE:
Good luck, Tom. You gotter do ‘im.

TOM:
Ay, I gotter do 'im. That's all there is, I just gotter do ‘im.

III. Scene Three
Tom walks to the venue

9) Aria

TOM:
“King wins!” I used to hear, not so long ago. When I was champion of New South Wales, and the money would flow. “King wins!” I wish someone told me to learn a trade. But I know I wouldn't have listened.

“King wins!” It was so intoxicating. The roar of the crowd, sports columns the next day. I could go a fast twenty rounds. Hammer and tongs, fight fight fight, from gong to gong, round to round. Saving the best for last. “King wins!” The crowd on their feet, blood rushing through my veins. Big money for a night's work, and nothing in between. I had so many friends wanting to know me. I'd never pay for a drink.

“King wins!” It was the old ones I was beating. But now I'm the old one, and they try the kids out on me. Youth is invincible, only age grows old.

(Tom makes it to the venue, his coach meets him outside the door)

10) Duet

TOM:
Hi Coach.

COACH:
You know this kid is fast, you know this kid is fierce.

TOM:
I do.
COACH:
You need to be smart, use your experience. He'll wear himself out trying to knock you out early.

TOM:
He doesn't need to conserve his energy...

COACH:
But you do. You'll have to dance with him a while, wait for your chance. Let him wear himself out, and leave himself open. Then you'll have to land the knockout.

TOM:
I don't know coach, my training has been awful this time around.

COACH:
It's the only way, all you'll need is one good blow.

TOM:
I'll make sure I have the strength to land it. (to himself) If I just had that piece of steak...

COACH:
What was that?

TOM:
I'll do him in when he gives me the chance.

COACH:
Attaboy.

(Tom and his coach walk into the venue, passing the crowd waiting for the match)

11) Chorus

CHORUS:
That's him, that's him, the great Tom King. Don't you know him? He’s the greatest in all of Australia. He's getting old now, past his prime.

(Sandel walks into the venue, waves to the crowd)

There he is! Sandel. There he is! the new kid. If he can beat old King we will know that he's for real. If he loses, he can go back to New Zealand for all we care. There will be someone else to take the crown from old Tom King. We only have room in our hearts for winners.

IV. Scene Four
The fight. The two boxers are in the ring. The coach is beside the ring and the chorus is
the crowd. Lizzie is sitting in the kitchen with a radio, listening to the broadcast of the fight.

12) Ensemble

RADIO:
And we're about to begin our premier match this evening. The longtime great Tom King, wearing blue, squaring off against the youngster from New Zealand, Pete Sandel.

COACH:
Remember Tom, you need to absorb.

LIZZIE:
Do him in, Tom.

(bell rings)

RADIO:
And here we go. And Sandel is all over King right at the get go. A furious rush of quick punches falling all over king.

CHORUS:
Come on, King, get him.

RADIO:
King faints back, shakes it off and is back in a defensive position. Shaking it off like a pro. Sandel comes back at him. Another flurry of punches and the crowd going wild! King, who is insisting on taking the punishment, is waiting for some sort of opening to attack.

LIZZIE:
Get him, Tom.

RADIO:
(crowd roars) And King lands a heavy blow to Sandel.

LIZZIE:
Yes!

RADIO:
Sandel's legs buckle and he tumbles onto the ring. He is rolling around as the referee is beginning his count. Sandel now on one knee, 7, 8, 9, and he's back up.

Another flurry from the youngster as King goes back on the defensive.

(Bell rings, fighters go back to their corners)
RADIO:
And that's the end of the first round.

COACH:
How you doing, Tom?

TOM:
I had him, when he left an opening. One inch closer to his jaw and I'd have a knockout.

COACH:
He's wasting energy with those punches at the bell.

TOM:
He has the energy to waste.

(Bell rings)

RADIO:
And now we kick off round two. More of the same from Sandel. King is not wasting any energy. Taking small hits in his own corner and waiting to pounce.

CHORUS:
Come on King, put up a fight you old bum!

COACH:
He's losing his energy, wait and strike!

RADIO:
Oh, and here comes King! Rushing at Sandel with a flurry of hard upper cuts. Sandel's legs are trembling as King pounces on him in the corner. Sandel does not look to be okay as King is hammering away. They might need to call this fight...

CHORUS:
Yeah King, get him, Tom!

LIZZIE:
You've got him. Stay with it!

(Bell rings)

Ah, and the round ends. Sandel is trying to get his wits about him. He is trying to convince the police chief to allow him to continue fighting. The referee nearly called that one, and a few more seconds in the round and Sandel would not have recovered.

TOM:
I had him there. Thirty seconds and I’d have knocked him out.
COACH:
It was a great rally, do you have one more in you?

TOM:
It was a two mile walk to the venue, and I could have used that piece of steak. I might have one in me, but I'll have to bring everything.

LIZZIE:
Come on, Tom. One more rally.

(Bell rings)

RADIO:
And here we begin the third round. Sandel is much more careful after his last attack from the experienced King. King and Sandel are dancing around, not giving any ground. Sandel begins landing blows again. King absorbing.

COACH:
Here it is.

LIZZIE:
Come on, Tom.

RADIO:
King begins his attack again. Quick strikes with an energy that we haven't seen from him all night!

CHORUS:
Yeah Tom, go get him.

LIZZIE:
You gotter do ‘im, Tom.

RADIO:
A flurry of punches, but King is starting to lose energy. Sandel steps back, King loads up and delivers a huge right hook to Sandel's jaw.

CHORUS:
He's got him!

RADIO:
The kid is on the ground, the referee counting it out.

TOM:
If I just had that piece of steak...
RADIO:
Sandel is now getting up on his knees.

LIZZIE:
Stay down.

RADIO:
7, 8, 9, and the kid is back up! With flurry of energy he comes back on the attack.

CHORUS:
Yeah, Sandel. Finish him out!

COACH:
That was his chance...

RADIO:
Sandel loads up and oh! A punishing blow to King. King is on the ground, he doesn't seem to be moving.

LIZZIE:
Get up, Tom. Get up!

COACH:
He's out.

RADIO:
7, 8, 9, and that's the match! There's a new champion here in Australia. The torch is passed from the legendary Tom King to the up and comer Pete Sandel, who knocks the one time great out in a classic match.

CHORUS:
Yeah, Sandel. We love you Sandel! Never doubted you at all!

COACH: *(standing over King)*
You okay?

TOM:
I needed...we needed that match.

RADIO:
And in what is most likely the final match of his storied career, Tom King puts up a great fight, but is no match for the youngster out of New Zealand. I don't know what King's next chapter is, but I have to imagine we won't be seeing him in the ring again.
13) Ensemble, Aria reprise

LIZZIE:
Is there anyone who can help?

CHORUS:
Sandel, the new king of Australia!

LIZZIE:
Is there anyone who cares?

CHORUS:
We'll always love you, Sandel. Drinks are on us!

LIZZIE:
You used to cheer for him, buy him drinks, and celebrate him in the ring.

CHORUS:
Don't let King fight anymore, the old man is washed up.

LIZZIE:
He has a fam’ly, who depend on him.

COACH:
I’m sorry Tom, I don't think we can book another fight.

LIZZIE:
Is there anyone who can help?

TOM:
What am I going to tell Lizzie?

LIZZIE:
Is there anyone who cares?